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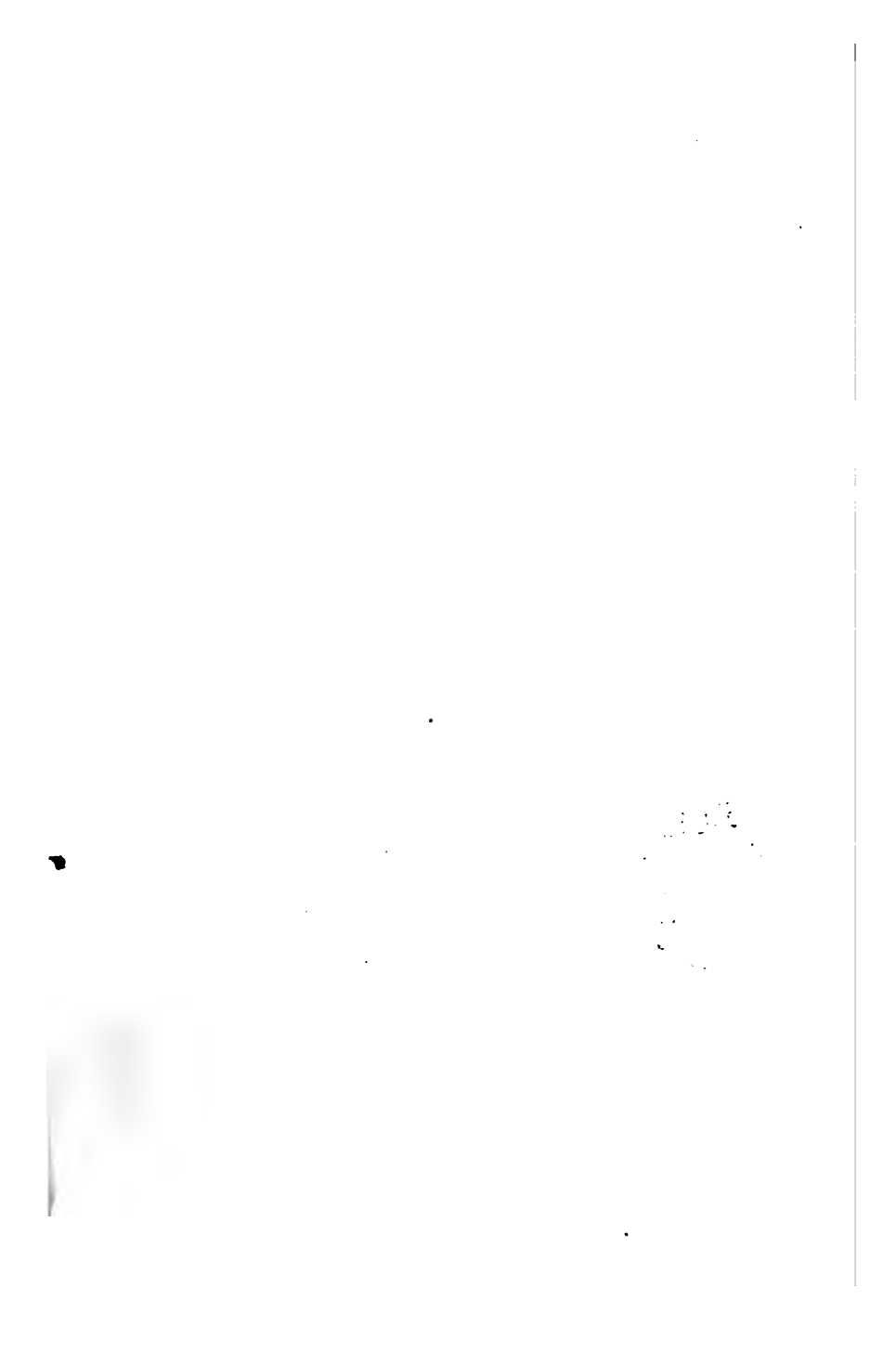


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A MINGLED YARN.



A MINGLED YARN.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. HENRY MACKARNESS,

AUTHOR OF "A TRAP TO CATCH A SUNBEAM," "A PEERLESS WIFE,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

"Life is a mingled yarn of good and evil."



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A MINGLED YARN.



CHAPTER I.

IN his own room sat Rupert Carrington, the packet confided to him by his uncle open before him. There were old letters, an agreement signed by Peter and Alice Poyntz, copies of a wedding and a baptismal register, and a long letter addressed to himself from the Major. He read that first.

“MY DEAREST RUPERT,

“The packet in which I enclose this contains many things interesting to you; and this full explanation of the circum-

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stances which induced me to adopt you and treat you as a dear son, is necessary for me to make, and you to learn. And if, when you have finished the perusal of this, you wish to be released from your promise solemnly made to me—that you would never see or hold communication with your parents, I am willing that you should, as I shall be dead when you read this, and the pride and vanity of this world will be over for me for ever. The wealth will be yours—treasured for your sake since I first knew of your existence; and it will be for you to determine how far your position and means will be consistent with the humble station of your parents.

“Your story is this—I had a sister, whom I loved more dearly than I can say. We were orphans, and I had to be father and mother to her. When I was compelled to leave England to join my regiment, I placed

her with a lady who took a few select scholars, hoping there she would be safe till my return. I will not go back to the particulars of that bitter time. I had no sister when I came home—she had fled, and with one who had been as my own familiar friend, and whom I had asked to watch over her. Furious, I refused ever to see or hear from her again. Time passed, and one day a woman came to me—in her arms a tiny baby-girl, to implore for it food and protection. Its mother had died in her arms, and with her last words had bid her bring the child to me. That baby was your mother, Rupert—*her* mother, my unhappy sister. At first I refused; but the poor woman pleaded its cause warmly, and I bid her place it with some respectable woman in the country, to whom I would pay a reasonable sum; but I would never see or communicate with the child, or in any way acknowledge

its relationship. Years went by, when my regiment was quartered in a country town. I had gone for a long ramble with two or three companions, and we stopped at a little roadside inn for refreshment. Suddenly, my attention was eagerly called by one of the fellows to a young woman who had stopped to exchange a word with some old men resting beneath the large tree which stood beside the inn. I turned to look at her, as he said :

“ ‘Did you ever see anything so lovely?’ ”

“ I had. She was the living semblance of my lost Alice. I sought her out, and in a humble cottage home—the wife of the village carpenter—I saw my sister’s child and you, her son, with the noble brow and patrician air of my treasured sister. I was childless and alone in the world. A firm desire possessed me to own that boy—to take him from his hard life to share my luxu-

rious one during my lifetime, my wealth at my death. I urged my case strongly, painted in glowing terms the advantages to you, and went from the village with a written promise, duly signed and attested, from your parents, never to trouble you or attempt to wean you from me, unless at your own free will, when you became of age, you decided to go back to them. It was wrong, Rupert, I fear, deluding myself with the belief I was doing a great kindness to you—I was but catering to my own selfish wish. But you, I think, have been happy ; at least, God knows I have done my best to make you so, and loved you with a father's love. Your parents' annuity I paid through my banker, and gave them a feigned name, and no address, to prevent, as far as possible, being troubled with them. But I heard accidentally, some time ago, that your mother was dead. My wishes, when I am

gone, can matter little ; but I should prefer to believe that you will legally take the name by which I have called you, and support the honour of my family as its only representative ; but if you elect to take your own name of Poyntz, and acknowledge the carpenter your father, be it so—I shall still leave you my heir, free to do as you will ; and your secret dies with your loving uncle,

“HERBERT CARRINGTON.”

Having carefully perused this, Rupert proceeded to read the letters. They were only affectionate, girlish epistles from the sister to the brother she had wronged. In them she spoke frequently of “Rupert’s” kindness. Next he read the agreement, and looked at his mother’s signature. As he did so, he could recall the beautiful face, the little homely cottage-room, and himself eagerly listening, but half understanding all

the gentleman said—willing to promise, without entering into all it meant—anything which should make him rich and a gentleman, and wondering that his mother should strain him so wildly to her heart, and weep so bitterly. How strange it now seemed to him that the years had gone by and obliterated all the early love and memory of those childish days; that the schoolboy-life, with its new acquaintances, its fresh interest; the care and luxury lavished on him in his new home; the soldier-life, the new friends, with never a word or thought of the old home brought before him, should make him so forget it all, and never think of the humble couple kneeling at their pallet bed, with tearful eyes praying for blessings on their son.

Never did the memory of those far-off days come back to him until, in a meadow one sunny summer day, an old man met

him, and, like a dream, they came again, and he started forward, forgetful of his promise, and cried, "Father!" but the old man passed him by hurriedly, without a word or look of recognition. Was he mistaken? He was older, greyer; but still it recalled the fine honest face of the man he had called father, and at whose knee he had conned his Sunday lessons—whom he had watched at his daily labour in that shed where he had gathered the shavings for his mother's fire. Again he met him, and as he was not alone, he had sprang away. But still the man either was not his father or held his promise too sacred, for he had not spoken or sought him any way. Then he had asked his name, and learnt how true his first conviction had been.

From that moment until his passion for Madeleine had absorbed him he had been haunted by his father's face, and

his desire to acknowledge him and be absolved from his promise. Now it was in his power. *What* should he do? Madeleine—a lady: could he ask her to wed the son of a village carpenter? His brother officers—men of rank, many of them: would they care to continue his acquaintance? Even the servants, who had treated him with such respect as their master's nephew—could he brave all the probable change in their manner? and, above all, the memory of what a grief it would be to the old man to whom he owed so much—did he know that the boy on whom he had lavished all his love and all his wealth was thus unmindful of his dearest wish?

Walter—he would write to Walter, and ask him to come to him and hear his story. He could trust him like himself; and he was wise and clear-headed, and

would counsel him best. And so he sent a hurried line to his office, asking him to come as soon as he could; and then, flinging himself on a couch, he tried to sleep, if possible, for the two nights' watching and anxiety (to which he was so unused) had thoroughly exhausted him, and in the short snatches of slumber he at last obtained Madeleine's face beamed on him, sometimes wreathed in bright smiles, but oftener in tears, as at their parting.

From the lattice window of her cottage home Madeleine looked out on the dripping night, thinking, too, of him who for ever occupied her thoughts. The locket had become dearer than ever since it had been in his possession; and it never left her neck now, day or night.

Since their parting she had received a letter from her Irish correspondent, which had greatly excited her; and a more hopeful,

buoyant look had returned to her face, which, since the meeting in the wood, had not been so bright as its wont, drawing on her the remarks of her two old companions, who so dearly loved her that every change in her face and manner were noticed.

It was late, but she felt disinclined to sleep, and preferred to sit thinking of Rupert, dreaming over again all his passionate vows of love, and now with a half hope that the words of re-call, for which he so longed, might be written; and Ralph—poor Ralph!—what was to be done about him? Sometimes she thought it would be right to tell him her secret. Perhaps, if he knew she was not his equal, but as far above him in station as he thought her in excellence, it might enable him to overcome the passion she appeared to have inspired him with; but so anxious was she to keep her incognito yet longer, that she felt she must

not trust him, and trusted that, by giving him no ray of hope to feed on, the love would exhaust itself.

While these mingled thoughts occupied her, she rose to look from her window at the rain which fell in such torrents; and as she stood looking into the dark night, she was struck by a lurid glare in the sky, for which she could not account. Broderip was not in bed—she would call him: it might be only the effect of some strong light on the heavy clouds, only she had never before observed it, and it had been wet every night lately.

The old man came at her call, and at once pronounced it a fire, but a long way off, he said. It was but the reflection of one far away. Lucky such torrents of rain were falling—it would help to put it out. “He did not know as he’d heard of a fire in them parts for forty

year, and not in the village since he could remember. That was lucky for 'em too, for it was a middling way to get the engines from Meresborough;" and so he went to bed, and bid Madeleine go too; but she could not sleep, and through the hours of the long night she lay thinking of Rupert, with his letter and the locket on her heart.

At the call of Dolly, Walter and Everard had hurried from the room to the window from which they could see the light. As they looked, pondering whether they should not at once take steps to break the rooms open and disclose the mystery, Dolly gave a sudden cry.

"Look!—smoke!" she said.

Smoke—aye! and a red glare too, shining through the shutters and through the chinks of the boards.

The wing was on fire, there was no doubt. The alarm was instantly given, and

in a moment the whole household, the immediate neighbours, and soon the village too, was astir, and rendering all possible help.

"We shall unearth the ghost now," said Walter, as he stood foremost among the line of men handing buckets.

"See, see ! a figure !" exclaimed Everard, working hard too, "at the further window. Oh ! for God's sake, let us save him, whoever he is."

"I thought the wing was empty. No one occupied it," said a man ; "but there is a figure."

"Yes ; you see it has undone the shutters. A ladder, a ladder, quick !" They had thought the place empty, and all efforts had been directed to save the rest of the house ; but quickly the ladder was brought, and placed against the burning building ; and pushing all aside, Walter, with compressed lips and a face of deadly whiteness, hastily

ascended it; but before he could gain the top rung the form had sunk back in the smoke and flames, and the crowd below implored him to come down, but in vain—he heeded not; and in breathless horror the men, with poor Everard, below, saw him enter the house. It seemed ages before he re-appeared, whilst the flames and smoke poured out, and the drenching rain came down all unheeded by that anxious crowd. At length there was a cry as he appeared again; and, half blinded and suffocated, he staggered out on to the ladder, with some charred, blackened object in his arms. They helped him with his burden, and when he reached the ground they took it from him, as he fell forward at his brother's feet,

CHAPTER II.

“WHAT a dreadful thing, Briggs! Oh, do go on telling all the particulars,” said Gertrude. “Stay, I must call the others;” and flying into the next room, with her long hair—which Briggs had begun to arrange—down her back, she begged Lilian and May to come instantly into her room and hear the dreadful news. Edith, who was very sleepy and had refused all Gertrude’s suggestions to get up, was sitting up in bed now fully awake, and horrified at the news.

“To think we should all have been quietly sleeping while such horrors were going on!” said Gertrude, coming back with Lilian and May, to whom she had rapidly imparted the

news. "Now, tell us, Briggs, when the fire broke out, and how it happened."

"That I can't tell you, my Lady. I only know that it was about twelve when they first saw it; and then they gave the alarm, and see the ghost come to the window and give a awful skreel and vanished; but how it happened I can't tell you. Mr. Walter, they say, behaved magnificent, and rushed in through the flames to see if there was any one in there, and brought out a dead body; and he's a good deal burnt, they say."

"Poor fellow! Have they saved the house? Were there many lives lost?" asked Lilian.

"I think they're doubtful about that, my Lady; some say two or three was killed. Of course there's no end of stories."

"Oh, dear! I hope Dr. Stillwell will come directly after breakfast and tell us all about it," said Gertrude. "If you are going out

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for your morning shower-bath, Edith, as your journey to school may be called, do send him—you'll pass his cottage."

"Going! of course I am."

"I thought Auntie objected to your going through such weather?"

"No; she only objected to my driving myself, because I could not keep myself so dry. James will drive Bobby to-day."

"Poor Bobby! such weather for him; and he hates it so, and shakes his pretty head."

"My dear Gertrude, if you'd half such a great-coat as Bobby, you might face any weather," said Lilian, laughing. "I tell you what, Edith. James, when he has put you down, must go to the Priory and take our cards, and inquire after poor Mr. Ashleigh."

"How lucky for Grace she was out of the alarm," said Gertrude; "and what will papa Ashleigh say when he finds his house was on fire—his children at home? I wonder if

Everard sat down and read a book all the time, while poor Walter risked his life to save the ghost? I suppose the people are convinced now it was not a ghost, Briggs, are they not, as it came to the window and screamed to be rescued?"

"Oh! but it vanished, my Lady; so of course they do believe it. Why, what or who else could it be?"

"Why, did you not say Mr. Walter brought out some poor unfortunate, dead? No doubt that was the person who, for some reasons of their own, has been imposing on village credulity so long," said Lilian.

"That was some one who had got through from the house into the room to help to put out the fire, my Lady."

"Then, do you imagine the ghost, for its own amusement, set fire to the place, and then vanished to secure its own safety? Oh, Briggs, I thought you were wiser."

"Only imagine seeing Philip going into a burning house," said May; "and he would, I am sure, if he thought he could do any good."

"Yes; but it strikes me he'd rather not," said Edith.

"What do you mean, Edith?" said May, sharply; but she corrected herself instantly, and said gently: "Well, I suppose everyone would *rather not*; but there are many, perhaps, who *would not*."

"And still more who had *better not*. In most accidents, inefficient help does more harm than good."

"But, Edith, if you'd been a man, and thought someone was in that burning house, would you not have gone in to try and save them?"

"No. Whoever was there had no business there; and a clever fireman would have saved his life, if it was to be saved, much better than I, and with less risk to his

own life. What is worse folly than flinging yourself madly into the water after some unhappy being, when you can't swim yourself, and so give people the trouble and anxiety of saving two lives instead of one? I do not see any heroism in it—only folly.”

“Oh, dear me! Edith, what a strange, cold thing you are!” said Gertrude.

“Very useful are such calm, practical people, Gertrude dear,” said Lilian. “It is a great thing to learn when and how to administer help, and a reckless sacrificing of one's life is often not so heroic as the patient waiting would have been. But really, girls, we must make haste and dress.—Auntie will be down first, and you will be late for school.”

May had slipped away, and was dressing quickly: she knew an impatient foot was pacing the library, thinking it ages before “someone” came down. She could hear

snatches of "La Donna Mobile," "Tu m'appari," "Deh! viène alla finestra," varied with, "He who adores thee," "Her bright smile haunts me still"; and so, hurrying as much as was compatible with the desire to look beautiful in his eyes, May, before all the rest, was down, and opening the library door, was seized and borne into the room, and told she looked perfect; she was his beautiful fairy. He loved that dress—she must always have one like that. What was it made of, so soft and graceful? merino? oh! it was charming; and the little blue bow fastening her collar, and in her hair, contrasting well with the glossy nut-brown: she was charming altogether. And then he asked her if she had heard of the fire? His valet had told him, the household seemed so excited about it; how he wished he had gone; and then May stole her hand into his, and said no, she was so glad he had not.

"But why, my darling? perhaps I could have done something valiant, which would have made you proud of me."

"There's no need. I *am* proud of you," she answered; "and you might have been hurt."

"And you would have been sorry," he said, looking down into the pretty, grey eyes.

"What do you think?" she said.

"Think that I am the happiest, luckiest fellow in the four kingdoms; that the very sunshine has grown brighter, the earth more glad, and life itself dearer, since I have won your love; and that if I go mad with joy and happiness, it will be all your fault."

"Then I'd better run away before you do," she said, laughing.

"No, you better hadn't; you'd better stay just where you are. You know you're very comfortable, and I'm not tumbling your hair

one bit—I wouldn't for the world, it's so pretty, and soft, and shiny."

"But we must go to breakfast," urged May.

"Oh, no! must we? haven't we had breakfast?"

"Now, Philip, you know we have not."

"Well, yes. But stop a little longer: no one is down, and I want to talk to you about so many things. Let me see, what did I want to say to you? you little gipsy, you put everything out of my—oh! I know. By Jove! how it rains! That wasn't it, though; it was about your ring. You must have a proper one for that sweet, little finger—not that clumsy one of mine. Gipsy reminded me of a gipsy ring. Shall it be one? alternate diamonds and turquoise—will you like that?"

"Yes, anything that you give me I shall love. Hark! that's Gertrude coming."

"Oh! here you both are. Good morning, your Grace. Will it please you both to breakfast? Was I not discreet to sing outside the door?" she whispered to May.

"You are very saucy, as you always are. Is Auntie down?"

Oh, yes! Auntie had been down an age, and wondering what they were all about. Of course the fire formed the chief topic of conversation during breakfast. Suddenly there was an inquiry for Edith. She had had coffee in her room; she feared she should be late, Gertrude explained.

"She's gone in the pony chaise, but I think she'll have to come home in a boat," she said laughing.

"Is it not somewhat a mad freak of her Ladyship's thus turning schoolmistress?" said the Duke.

"Well, you see, her intention was excellent," said Mistress Medlicott, "and she is

doing, I believe, a very kind action; and had the weather been propitious, I do not think there would have been anything against it, for she is of such a naturally indolent disposition, that I was glad to see her rousing herself to any exertion; but this weather is really fearful, but, having promised, she was compelled to carry it out."

"How Edith would have grumbled if she had been *made* to do it, Auntie," said Gertrude, slyly.

"Yes: naturally, love, to be compelled to do a disagreeable thing adds very much to the annoyance. When we are doing what we wish ourselves, the difficulties and discomforts do not appear half so formidable. I hope, Lilian, you thought of sending James to the Priory: we must not give the poor servants more journeys through this weather than we can help."

"I did, Auntie dear. Again they will

disappoint us at our dinner-party. Young Mr. Ashleigh is so hurt, that, of course, he will not be able to come."

"Yes; we generally get disappointed there, do we not? Why, here comes the good Doctor through this torrent, I declare!"

"Ah! that's for me, the good old dear!" said Gertrude. "He's coming to tell me all the particulars: he knows I like to hear everything from the beginning, and he's the only one who thoroughly indulges me."

"And spoils you, Gertrude."

"Just a little, perhaps," said Gertrude, laughing; and the Doctor was soon released from his wet cloak, and installed in the most comfortable chair, with Gertrude on a stool at his feet, receiving all the news he had to relate. But it was little more than she knew. Walter had rescued a person from the burning room, supposed to be there for some nefarious purpose. Whether he had

set fire to the room was not yet known: he should go up presently and inquire about them—probably Everard would see him.

Mistress Medlicott proposed that, as the Doctor had come through such weather, Gertrude had better read with him, and then he could make himself happy in the library until after lunch, when the rain might abate a little.

Gertrude could not help wishing that the Doctor had gone to the Priory first, that she might have heard the very latest intelligence from the best authority; and therefore an agreeable surprise awaited her, when, just before the time to dress for dinner, the Doctor was shown into the drawing-room, and little as they knew of him or liked him, it was with horror they heard, as they all eagerly asked the news, that the only life lost in the fire was that of—Mr. Ashleigh!

“Poor Walter is dreadfully knocked up,”

said the Doctor. "The horror and excitement of discovering, when he reached the burning room, that it was his father who was the victim, has quite overcome him. He is scorched, too, a little about his hands and face, but not severely burnt: the mental distress they are most anxious about."

"But I do not understand," said Gertrude. "I thought Mr. Ashleigh was in town."

"So did they; but they fancy he must have returned under some suspicion of wrong-doing in his absence. That unfortunate wing has been the cause of endless annoyance ever since they have been there, and they think it has lately been used by someone who wished to conceal papers or something there. There are evidently some family affairs of an unpleasant nature, which Everard naturally did not care to enter into with me, but, at any rate, this is a most fearfully tragic event in any family."

"It is, indeed, too horrid," said Mistress Medlicott. "I hope that poor young man will recover the sad shock. I like what I saw of him better, I think, than the elder one."

"They are both excellent young men; very different in character, but very good, both of them," answered the Doctor. "Everard much the cleverest; but there is a something about Walter which draws one irresistibly towards him."

"Mr. Everard Ashleigh is very nice to talk to," said Gertrude.

"Yes; he had a long talk with you at the picnic," said Edith.

"He did; he gave me quite a lesson on botany: he seems to know everything."

"He is very studious," said the Doctor, "and makes good use of what he knows."

"Will this sad event make them leave the Priory, do you think?" asked Lilian, and

those watching her narrowly might have seen a slight flush on her face as she spoke.

“I think it highly probable, my Lady. The melancholy circumstance will make the place distasteful to them, and I should think that nervous, delicate daughter would never like to live there.”

“No, poor thing! I wonder who will break the news to her?”

“Her brother Everard has written. I offered to do anything in my power in the writing way, but he said he was glad to be occupied in what *must* be done.”

“Yes; it is a great mercy that in times of great affliction there is so much that must be done, and the necessity to dine and dress and all those commonplaces of life, compel the exertion we are so unwilling to make. And now, Doctor, after all your kindness, you must stay here and dine now, and not again

encounter this weather," said Mistress Medlicott.

"Oh! my dear madam, I cannot: I am not dressed for dinner."

"But we are only a family party. His Grace of Claverton is my dear nephew Philip now, and will waive all ceremony, I know. Here he is, to answer for himself."

"What is it? what am I to say?" he asked.

"To excuse Dr. Stillwell making a grand toilet to-night. He has come here in our service, and we cannot let him go away until he has dined."

"Certainly not, certainly not. I don't mean certainly not I won't excuse him, you know," said the Duke, laughing. "I mean, certainly do not let him go until he has dined. In such lamentable weather as this dinner is a greater necessity than usual.

And do you know, Auntie," he said in a low voice, sitting down on the ground at her feet, as he often did now, "I have not in the least lost my appetite ; indeed, it has increased to an alarming and most unromantic degree since I came here."

"I am glad to hear it," said Mistress Medlicott ; "it is a good proof of a healthy mind in a healthy body."

"Edith, are you going to the school again to-morrow, or are your aquatic expeditions over ?" asked the Duke.

"Yes, of course I am ; I have promised to go on for a month, you know."

"Are you not getting tired of it ?"

"No, not at all ; but Ma'mselle has kindly undertaken to help me—for the monitors, who are supposed to take care of the small babies, are more troublesome than their charges, and I want someone to look after them—but I shall not let her go if

the weather is like this, because there is only room in the pony-chaise for James and me."

"Then why do you not have the brougham, Edith?" asked her aunt.

"Oh, it would be too absurd to have the brougham to take the infant school-mistress to her work."

"I think the kind deputy might be allowed the indulgence, though, and I must insist on your having it to-morrow, dear Edith: this is not like summer rain, and you will be catching cold."

"Very well, Auntie; but perhaps it will be fine to-morrow: it must be tired of raining."

"We will hope so. Where is May all this time?"

"She is gone to the library to write a letter, and forbade me to come, or she should not write sense," said the Duke. "But she must have finished by this time—it's an age

ago, so I shall go and see;" and away he went, Gertrude mischievously taking out her watch as he passed her, to show him he had been exactly ten minutes absent from her.

CHAPTER III.

EVERARD ASHLEIGH and Rupert Carrington are seated together in the drawing-room of the pretty and well-appointed house—hushed and darkened now, till the owner, who is lying in the solemn dignity of death, shall be carried to his last earthly resting-place. Everard had thought it better to come and see his mother, and tell her of the awful mode in which she had been released from him who for years had made her life a torment; and Walter had asked him to see Rupert, tell him, and bid him come down to them as soon as he could.

“Walter got my letter?” he asked.

"He did, yesterday morning, and he was the more anxious that you should hear all this horrid story, to explain his not writing to condole with you on your good uncle's loss."

"Yes ; Walter's troubles are heavier than mine now," said Rupert.

"Well, it would be, of course, affectation to pretend to feel deep sorrow for such a father as ours was ; but still he *was* our father, and the veil of death softens faults, and makes them appear less odious. We remember now more what he was when we were children at his knee, when we looked up to him and loved him : that is the father we seem *now* to have lost."

"Exactly ; I can understand that. Is poor Walter *much* hurt, do you think?"

"No, not seriously, I hope ; but his hands are scorched, and his face slightly, and he feels strained and exhausted, and

keeps acting in his mind the horrid scene over and over again. I shall get him away as soon as possible. I have agreed with my mother to give the place up—we should none of us be ever happy there again.”

A slight smile passed over Rupert’s face as he said:

“Not on a visit?”

“What do you mean?” asked Everard.

“Why, I mean I should like to have it. Let me buy it of you. I had made up my mind when my poor uncle died to sell out and come and live in your neighbourhood—why not at the Priory?”

“Well, my dear fellow, I am sure I shall be delighted to let you have it, and I have no doubt in your hands it will assume a much brighter appearance.”

“Talk it over, then, with Walter, and let me know.”

“You will want a wife there, Rupert.”

"Yes ; in course of time I *shall* bring one there, probably."

"Don't be hasty about it, Rupert : it is a matter for grave consideration—beauty is not all."

"Indeed, no ; a very charming adjunct, though, you will admit."

"Yes ; but I think I should want three good things in a wife, all of them, to my mind, indispensable : good temper, good sense, and good birth."

"You are right ; and I have secured all, only adding to them good looks."

"Then you are a fortunate fellow," said Everard ; and to himself he said : "Walter has been misinformed."

"How did your mother and sister bear your news, Everard ? I have not asked you : one's own affairs somehow keep selfishly cropping up, to the exclusion of other peoples'."

"A common fault of humanity, Rupert. One's own affairs must ever touch one more nearly. Well, I think they were both glad of their release, but sorry for the manner of it."

"And you have no clue to the object of your unfortunate father's visit to the empty wing, nor an idea of the cause of the fire?"

"To hide away and destroy at leisure certain documents, we think, for an open iron chest was found with a quantity of charred paper in it, and a heap of ashes in the grate."

"It is very singular, and the sad thing is that you can never now ascertain the truth."

"Well, we fancy that the butler knows a little, and my uncle, if we can discover him, will tell us a great deal, no doubt."

"Will he ever put in an appearance again, do you think?"

"I am not sure: it depends on how far he is acquitted of the crime of which he was accused. We are certainly fortunate in our relations, are we not?" he said, with a sad smile.

"You are," said Rupert, "rather; but brighter days will come, old fellow, I hope. When is the funeral?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"We bury the poor Major to-morrow; so, if it would be any comfort, I would come down to you in the evening."

"It would, indeed. I know Walter would feel better at the sight of you: he is not diffuse in his friendships—those he does love he loves truly."

"And I am one, I believe. Poor, dear, old Pop! Tell him I will come."

"And you will follow; or would you rather not?"

"Yes; certainly I will."

"There will be a large gathering: it has made a sensation in the quiet village, and people are anxious to show their sympathy for us."

"I have no doubt. What about your mother and sister? are they going down to the Priory at all?"

"No; we have decided it is better not. They will remain where they are until we can get rid of the Priory, and, in the meanwhile, the mother will look for a pretty, small house in town."

"That is a very good plan. Then let me know, as soon as you can, about the Priory, and I will try and make it a bright place, where you will all, I hope, like to come and visit me."

As Everard was leaving the room the servant brought two letters for Rupert. One bore the Haseley Mere post-mark, in a delicate, woman's hand. He held it for a

moment before he opened it, his heart beating rapidly as the thought rushed into his mind—"It is from Madeleine!" He feared to open it and be disappointed. It must be from her—who else can it be? It is opened at last, and he reads:

"Come back to me.

"Yours, for ever,

"MADELEINE."

With rapture he presses the few words to his lips, and then, with a sudden start, he remembers that *he* has an obstacle to remove now. What is he to do? He has no fear of her, if he tells her the truth. But her relations—what will they say? Shall he keep it for ever a secret? But if it should by chance be revealed!—would she trust him again? No! *she* must be—she should be told, come what would. And, snatching up a

pen, before he looked at the other letter, he wrote :—

“MY TREASURE,

“Your letter has filled me with joy and sorrow. I would come to you directly, but my uncle is just dead, and I must be here to pay him the last honours. Then I will fly to you ; but, be prepared—I have that to tell you which may make you see another bar to our union, more difficult to surmount. I would have told you when I was with you, but I was under a pledge of secrecy. Now I am free to speak. You shall know all, and I shall leave myself in your hands. If you are a free agent, and may act for yourself, you will decide in my favour, I believe. To-morrow evening I will see you, my darling—my beloved for ever ! whatever happens.

“RUPERT.”

Then he turned to the other letter. Again a Haseley Mere postmark.

“DEAR SIR,

“Poor old Poyntz is dying. You appeared to be strongly interested in him. If you would see him alive, go at once.

“Yours,

“J. STILLWELL.”

In a quarter of an hour from the perusal of that letter Rupert was on his way to the little village, where the rays of the setting sun, gleaming through the murky clouds and glistening on the rain-drops hanging on branches, and leaves, and window-ledges, rested on the dying form of the poor old schoolmaster. A young, handsome face watches beside him, with clustering brown hair, and deep blue, earnest eyes, with an eager, wistful look in them, as they are fixed on the

closed lids—on the open mouth and dry lips, from which the breath comes thick and fast.

“Has he not spoken at all?” he asks eagerly of the woman who stands beside him.

“Not since he was took for worse, sir.”

“And has he asked for anyone—before he grew worse, I mean?”

“No, sir, not ezactly; but he’s talked a great deal of his son, sir.”

There was a pause, and then Rupert said gently, bending over the dying form of the old man: “Father!”

He opened his eyes, cast a wild look around the room, and made a faint effort to rise.

Rupert put his hand under his head, raising it gently, and looking earnestly into his face, said again: “Father!”

The old man fixed his eyes on his

with a strange, earnest gaze, and then a smile broke over his face, which seemed to give it a supernatural light, and his head fell back on Rupert's arm.

"Oh, put him down, sir!—he's gone, poor dear!" said the woman. "You've no call to fret, sir; he's died so happy."

Poor Rupert! The two beings who had, perhaps, loved him best on earth had passed away within such a short time of each other, and by neither could he feel assured he was recognized or forgiven.

After a few moments he turned to Mrs. Wenham, and said:

"That was my father. I wish you to see that his funeral is conducted with every possible propriety, without ostentation, on Tuesday. I should wish him buried at three o'clock. I will be here to attend as chief mourner. You have been kind to him; put yourself in such mourning as you deem

necessary," he said, putting into her hand a bank note. "And have you written to Dr. Stillwell?"

"I have, sir; I'm expecting him every moment."

"I cannot stay longer now. I have an important appointment; but tell him what I have told you. I will send him a note, requesting his attendance at the funeral."

Yes; Rupert's mind was made up. He would, before the world, acknowledge his birth, tell the story as it was told to him, and content himself with such friends as would still cling to him. He would not wait for Walter's counsel now, but do what seemed to him right and straightforward, and leave the issue in higher hands. Bearing as his motto for life his uncle's last words, "Wrong will never come right," he would strive earnestly to take the straight and narrow way henceforth, which, however

difficult and unpleasant, was the right way. He could see the long course of wrong which his poor uncle had taken, which in his last moments he had felt so bitterly ; his forgetfulness, first, of the Divine command, "until seventy times seven," which drove from him the guilty sister and her innocent child ; then the pride which made him ashamed to acknowledge as relations the humble village girl and her husband, and the selfishness which took from them their "one ewe lamb"—the brightness of their little home to gladden his, all the time lulling himself in the security of the good action he was doing !—so, above all things, deceitful is the human heart. All this Rupert plainly saw, and by the new light determined—even if it should sever him from the one being on earth whom he loved so fondly, from the dreams of perfect earthly happiness he imagined—he would no longer

conceal his humble origin, or be ashamed to own himself the son of Peter Poyntz, carpenter and schoolmaster.

He had written a hurried line to Walter to say business of importance would prevent his reaching the Priory until very late, but he would come as soon as he could, and opened his letter to Madeleine, to add that he might be detained by a pressing business ; but, if he could not get to her that evening, he would be with her the first thing in the morning. And now, not waiting for rest or refreshment, though Mrs. Wenham pressed them both, he hurried away to Haseley Mere to hear his fate, and receive Madeleine's decision.

CHAPTER IV.

“WHAT had we better do? Oh, Lily, I’m so frightened! It was so obstinate of Edith to go.”

“No, no, Gertrude, not ‘obstinate.’ She had promised, and would not go from her word; you know she is very fearless, and would not believe in any danger.”

“But it is so headstrong of her! Mr. Prescott told her last night that the waters were out all over the place, and that our village stream looked very swollen and angry; and he implored her not to keep exposing herself to this weather. I believe she has gone as much out of defiance to him as anything.”

"Don't be unjust, Gertrude, because you are frightened and anxious. Where is Philip?"

"I don't know; shall I go and find him, and ask his advice?"

"Yes. Who do you say told you this story?"

"James' mother. She has come down for the wine for Janey, and she says she hears the village is like a sea; that the water is in the ground floors of all the cottages in the street, and two of the bridges are carried away."

"There is some exaggeration, I doubt not. Does Auntie know?"

"Not yet; I thought it would frighten her, so I came to you first. What shall we do?"

"I will go and tell her, and you find Philip, and consult with him on what is best to be done."

"Yes, I will. James says the wind was so tremendous, he could scarcely drive; and he asked Edith to turn back, but she wouldn't; she said it didn't rain, and the wind would not matter. The water was tremendously high, then; and he heard that all Oatlands near the river was under water. I'll run and find Philip."

"Oh! don't be frightened," he said, as, with white face and tearful eyes, Gertrude rapidly related her story; "it's quite an excitement. Let me order a horse that is not afraid of water, and I'll have Edith out of a two pair, back or front, as the case may be, in no time. Poor girl! She must be teaching the young idea how to swim now, instead of shoot! Cheer up," he said, kindly; "we shall have her home all right—it's a splendid adventure! What about May?" he said, suddenly; "she'll be in a state of mind! I'd better go without her knowing it. Oh,

no!—poor darling!—I can't do that. I'll run and put it in the best light, and you order my horse like a dear—and it would be as well to let a groom go on another."

In a moment or two more the Duke was galloping up the avenue, followed by a groom—the girls, Mistress Medlicott, and Ma'mselle watching them away. May, pleased and proud that her dear Philip had gone so willingly to the rescue, though by no means convinced that there was no possible danger, and that he should be home in no time, which was what he had assured her. Bending his head to the wind, the Duke rode on, and suddenly heard his name loudly called by a horseman, riding rapidly towards him.

"Prescott," he said, reining up his horse, "where are you going?"

"Is she at the school?" he asked, hurriedly.

“She—Edith? yes; I am posting there to get her back.”

“For God’s sake, lose no time!” and turning his horse’s head back towards the village, without another word the two young men rode rapidly on.

Dire confusion reigned in the little streets. Two of the small bridges had been dashed away, and the others were broken, and would soon follow. The turgid, angry water flowed on and on, rushing through the little gardens, and filling the little cottages. Every available cart was in requisition—some carrying old people and children away; others furniture which the scared inhabitants were trying to save. Higher and higher the water rose, with frightful rapidity, bearing down fences, sheds, floating the farm-yards, and carrying away the poor animals, as they uttered piteous cries for help; flowing on to the church, and over

the graves, bearing away the flowers and wreaths, laid there in loving memory, sparing nothing in its ruthless course.

"Where is the school?" asked Prescott. It was the first word they had spoken in their desperate ride; for, as they neared the village, they saw the danger was imminent, and their anxiety had increased till they had not cared to speak, only to urge their horses forward.

"The other side of the street near the church," said the Duke. "Will your horse face water?"

"He must," said Prescott, calmly.

"I was thinking whether we could ride round any way."

"There is no time for that," he said, as a turning in the road, up which the water was beginning to flow, revealed the scene of desolation.

"Which is the school-house?" said the

Duke to some men who were trying to stop the water from flowing into a cottage, in an upper room of which lay an old bedridden woman.

“Over yonder, sir, where you see that waggon. The lady’s there, sir. She wouldn’t come out till the children is out: she’s got a rare job!”

On rode the two young men, followed rapidly by the groom; and soon they are up to their saddle-girths in the foaming water, in which, dashing along, are large planks and dead animals, a poor dog in a kennel, trying, with her own body, to keep dry her few days’ old puppies, yelping in her terror and despair.

At the upper windows of the houses, weeping women stand gazing out on the wreck of the village, with eyes blinded with tears, straining to see if the cart they have sent for the “children” is arriving with

its precious freight. On go the struggling horses, bravely breasting the waters, starting aside as the broken fences and planks struck against their legs, and at length the three horsemen are beside the waggon, in which are placed some twenty little children; and at the upper window of the school-house stands Edith, lifting tenderly down to the men in the waggon a tiny, screaming, frightened child. Some ten or a dozen more are clinging screaming to her; but, with a calm face—calm, and still, and resolute as it is in her own drawing-room—she takes the little frightened things, one by one, and hands them to the men in it. Over and over again they have conjured her, for Mistress Medlicott's sake, to come away herself; but she has smiled down on them with a glance of supreme contempt, and said: "What! and leave these helpless children here? For no one's sake on earth!" And so, obeying her

orders, given with such calm and cool command, they went and got a waggon ; and she, gathering the poor, frightened flock into the upper room, told them stories, with two or three of the smallest on her lap ; spoke of Him who walked on the water as on dry land, and who was caring for them now ; and that, if the kind men in the waggon could not carry them home, He would, and that would be better still.

She saw the Duke and Prescott before they saw her ; and as they came beneath the window she said, in a cool, cheerful voice :

“Are you come to help me with my poor babies ?”

“We are come for you, Edith,” said the Duke. “Can you get out of that window ? If so, I can take you before me on my horse.”

“I dare say I can ; but the babies first. Could you give some orders for boats to be fetched ? surely they could get some from

the Ferry. Do go and see—the water increases frightfully.”

“I shall not move from here,” said Prescott, as the Duke looked inquiringly at him.

“But we shall be compelled in a moment, if the water goes on at this rate. Do come, Edith—the men will see to the babies.”

“But who is to lift them out? they are so small and so frightened. No, no! there are only about twenty more,” she said. “Here comes another waggon: we shall soon get them all out.”

While she spoke, Prescott had urged his horse nearer the house, and, jumping from the saddle, had dashed through the schoolroom—now up to his knees in water—and rushed up the staircase into the room, where, taking the child Edith was just raising in her arms from her, he said:

"Your ladyship must excuse me, but you will at once leave this room by the, I admit, somewhat unusual exit of this window, or not another child goes into the cart!"

"What do you mean?" she said, indignantly.

"What I say. If you will immediately make your escape, as the Duke proposes, I give you my sacred promise, as a gentleman, that I will not leave this place whilst one child is left in it. These heavy, sturdy urchins I can manage better than you. See, I can take two at a time—there they go," he said, as, gently pushing her aside, he took two of them, one under each arm, and carefully deposited them in the man's arms below. "Now, will you go?"

"I can trust you, I think," she said, looking fixedly at him; "but yourself?"

"Edith, come," called the Duke, "I entreat you! The horse is getting so

fidgetty. Prescott, I believe yours won't stand."

"Let him go, then," said Prescott, calmly. "Hold steady, her Ladyship is coming. Tell George to take the mare's head;" and seizing Edith in his arms, he let her gently down to the Duke, who placed her before him, and was riding away with her before she could recover herself.

"Go round, your Grace, through Westmere," called the groom, galloping after him. "Don't try to ford the stream with my Lady!"

"Which way?" asked the Duke. "You ride on first; I'll follow. Are you frightened, Edith?"

"Not a bit; but those children! Mr. Prescott says he will not leave them."

"Then they are safe. He never broke his word since he could speak," answered the Duke.

Mistress Medlicott, though calm and quiet as usual, was very anxious ; and, after some little time, proposed that the carriage should be sent down the road to meet Edith, and some brandy and some wraps put in it, as she feared that she and the Duke would suffer from the cold and wetting which, at the very best, they must have.

“As the groom is with Philip, he can bring his horse home,” she said, “if he will come in the carriage. I think I will go myself to meet them.”

“No, no.” Against that the girls loudly protested, and it was finally arranged that Ma’m selle should go. But before the orders could be carried out a carriage came driving rapidly up the avenue, and in another moment Edith was being smothered in kisses by her sisters, the Duke standing patiently by until the excitement had somewhat subsided, and then he said, very meekly :

“Are you not all very pleased to see me, and very much obliged to me?”

One little hand stole into his, and a few murmured words made him deaf to all besides, until Gertrude said :

“Now, Philip, do sit down, and tell us all about everything. How did you get this dear girl out of the house? and how did you get in the Priory carriage?—for I see it is theirs: and tell us all about it, beginning at the beginning.”

And so he did, interrupted by Gertrude’s enthusiastic exclamations of delight at Mr. Prescott.

“And now about the carriage. How came you to have that?”

“Well, your groom told me not to venture back the same way I came, but advised going some round, which I bid him show me and I would follow. We found ourselves at the back of the Priory

gardens; and, standing at the gate, was young Ashleigh, with some remarkably good-looking young fellow. Seeing our plight, Ashleigh stepped forward and asked if there had been an accident, and could he be of any assistance? I was only too glad to get poor Edith a more comfortable position, and at once said: 'Yes. Lend me a carriage to take home her Ladyship.' No sooner said than done: we were shown into the library, given wine and biscuits—and here we are."

"Which Mr. Ashleigh was it?" asked May.

"Not the hero of the fire, for he was still keeping his room—the brother told me so."

"It was Everard, then," said Gertrude. "Well, I am glad he can come out of his books, and make himself useful sometimes."

"Edith, dear, you're tired," said Lilian; "come up-stairs with me."

"Oh, no! I'm not in the least. I'm very thirsty; I should like some water."

"The luncheon is on the table; let us go in without waiting for the summons," said Mistress Medlicott.

"No, I don't want any luncheon. I'll go up-stairs," said Edith.

"Ah! but she will faint away," said Ma'mselle, going quickly to her; for, as she tried to rise from her seat, she staggered and fell back.

"What is it, dear? Do you not feel well?" said her aunt, coming to her.

"Oh, yes! I'm quite well," gasped the poor girl; "but I sprained my wrist lifting one of the children, and it—it——"

No more words could come from the white lips—Edith had fainted. With a powerful effort, however, she in a few moments recovered herself, and only implored to be allowed to go up-stairs and be quiet in her

own room, and Ma'mselle should come and bind her wrist up—she should be quite well by dinner ; and so, knowing her great dislike to be made a fuss with or to be detected in anything like weakness or giving way, they let her have her will ; and the Duke, requesting Mistress Medlicott to excuse him from luncheon, said he must go back to the village, and see after his friend, and try to be of use. Ashleigh did not know anything like the extent of the mischief, and he and his friend intended starting at once.

“Don't get hurt, Philip ; be back before dark,” said May.

“I'll take care of myself, my beauty, for your sake.”

“Bring Mr. Prescott back with you,” said Mistress Medlicott. “Come, girls, you must be fainting for food. Gertrude, dear, run up to Edith, and tell her I insist on

her eating. Ma'mselle had better remain with her, and have her luncheon, too, taken there."

All that afternoon they could settle to no employment. May sat chiefly at the window, watching for Philip; and at last he came, but alone. Prescott thought his mother would be uneasy, and had gone home. He had stayed till every child was safe, and been working hard with him since. It was a sad scene, and it would be long, he feared, ere Haséley Mere would cease to remember the Great Flood.

CHAPTER V.

It was growing dusk when Rupert reached the old farm, where, from the window, watched Madeleine so anxiously. Her face was lighted with the radiance of happiness, increasing tenfold her beauty. She was holding in hers the hand of the good old woman, who had kept her secret so faithfully, and learned to love her so truly that, as she sat now waiting for him who was to take her away, the tears dimmed her eyes, and she could only look in Madeleine's face with a loving, yearning look that, even amidst her bright happiness, pained her to see.

"Here he comes!" she said at last, with a sigh of deep content and relief.

The poor old woman loosed her hold of her hand, and said :

“Let him in, dearie ; his eyes be wearying for a sight on you.”

With her heart beating, and trembling with joy and agitation, Madeleine went to the door.

“Is Miss——” he began. It was so dark in the narrow passage, but her white hands were held out to him, and in a moment they were caught, and she was held to his heart.

It seemed a long time to Mrs. Broderip since Madeleine had gone to let him in ; but she only sighed, and said :

“Ah, well ! time’s nought to them now.”

Presently they came in—he with his arm still round her, his bright face all aglow, looking so handsome, so glad ; and she, her fair head leaning on his shoulder, a whole world of love in her radiant eyes.

And as they stood thus before her, the poor old woman rose from her seat, and raising her hands, said solemnly, as the tears which had been so long dimming her eyes fell down her withered cheeks :

“May the Almighty bless thee both, and bless thy love, and make thee happy here and hereafter.”

“Thank you, good old friend,” said Rupert, taking her hands in his and pressing them cordially, while Madeleine put her arms round her, and placed her tenderly back in her seat.

“Let me sit here at your feet, and you shall tell my tale to Rupert. Will you, Granny dear?”

“As you will, my child. Ah, yes! close beside her sit. You’ve won a treasure; guard it well, my man. Her ‘price is above rubies.’”

“Hush, hush! no flattery,” said Made-

leine, smiling, "or I shall fear to trust you with my tale. Now begin."

"Yes, I am impatient, Madeleine," said Rupert, "for I have a tale to tell, too, that may change all this joy to grief for me, and leave me to grasp only the shadow of the happiness I have dreamed of, lived for, prayed for, since I first looked in your dear face."

"Rupert, have no fear. There is nothing you can tell me that will alter my love for you now, or make me break my promise."

He pressed the hand she had placed in his to his lips; and then Mrs. Broderip said:

"You see, sir, I had a daughter who went to live in Ireland. She married there an Irish soldier, who died and left her with one baby girl—Kathleen," she said, smiling. "To help herself along she offered herself

as nurse to a lady who was not strong enough to nurse her own baby, and so this dear young lady became my child's foster child. Her mother—her beautiful mother"—(Rupert touched the locket hanging round Madeleine's neck). "Yes, that's the face, sir.—Well, she had married an old man, old enough to be her father. Foolish girl! She thought his wealth would make her happy, and, too soon, she learned how little power money only had. Then came one with fair face and winning tongue; and she knew, poor thing! too late, how worthless was the gold for which she had given her hand. But he was a good, true, noble man, was her husband. He saw it all—saw how the poor young thing struggled against her love; and he were that kind and patient, that he helped her to be strong and faithful to him. And she was, sir, though this bitter world said different. But

—sad for her, poor dear!—suddenly the good old man died—died by poison ; and through the city the cruel slanderers pointed to the poor wife and him who would have been her lover ; and, sir, they took them up on a charge of murder ! It could not be proved, and they were let off ; but still no one believed in their innocence, and that fairly broke the poor mother's heart, sir, and she died, and this poor dear child grew up under her foster mother's care, determining never to take her station as a lady till her mother's name were cleared. Then little Kathleen died, and my poor girl got into a bad way ; and, as she felt her time was not long on earth——”

“Let me finish, dear granny,” said Madeleine. “My poor foster mother, Rupert, urged me to take a house and servants, and have a lady with me to take charge of me, and be Miss Fitzgerald—spending and enjoying

the wealth my poor father left me—but I said, ‘No, I will go to England to your mother and father and be their child, and comfort them for your sake, who have been so good to me, and never take the name of Fitzgerald till I am not ashamed to own it.’ I stayed with her, Rupert, till she was released from all her sufferings, and then came here. Bravely and truly have these dear people kept my secret; and now my prayer is granted. A wretched woman, who was our servant, has died in Dublin; and, on her deathbed, has owned that she gave my poor father the wrong medicine, and in dread and terror left her situation on the plea of sudden illness. Her deposition has been written down, and in it she clears my mother of every stain upon her character, praying in mercy she may be believed—that in her death she may repair the evil which in her life she caused. While

on my mother's name such shame rested I would be no man's wife ; nor, Rupert——"

"Now, my treasure—my love," he said, bending down to her, "will you honour with your hand one all unworthy of you? Madeleine, I am the son of Peter Poyntz, the old schoolmaster of Haseley Mere, who was in early days a village carpenter. This is my secret. Can you now fulfil your promise?"

"Rupert! you do not mean this?"

"I do," he said, sadly, for he felt he had shocked her with his revelation.

"Then," she said, "I can only say that—oh! foolish Rupert—I am ashamed to think you could, for one moment, call *this* an obstacle. You had but a poor estimate of the love you say you prize. Granny, ought I to refuse him?" she said, smiling in her old friend's face.

"No, no, my dear; he has that in his

face which makes him noble, be he what he is ; and may God bless and prosper you both, and make your lives blest through life unto death, and beyond ;” and with this benediction she left them to themselves.

“ And you have no one who can control you in this matter, my darling ? ” he asked, when they were alone.

“ No one, Rupert—I am now alone in the world. Our good lawyer, who was an old friend of my dear father’s, counsels me in most things, but believes in me implicitly, too : he spoils me, I think. He has been taking care of my property, which has all this time been out at interest : I would only use just enough to keep me according to the station I chose to move in. He thought—dear old thing!—I was very foolish ; but, Rupert, I could not have borne to be pointed out as ‘ that Miss Fitzgerald ’ whose

mother had been accused of crime. I am supposed to be dead—to have died at my foster mother's; only the lawyer, Mr. Donaldson, and his daughter—another Kathleen—have been in my secret, and they have continually corresponded with me and wrote constantly. When the unhappy woman made her confession Mr. Donaldson at once wrote to me. He had always some suspicion of her, and has endeavoured for a long while to trace her.”

“Tell me one thing, dearest, will you? Do you know the name of the young man who was implicated with your poor mother in this unjust charge?” asked Rupert.

“I do; a name well known to you—Ashleigh.”

“I thought so. Walter's uncle.”

“Really, Rupert, are you sure?” she said, eagerly. “I fancied it might be, and can well believe it, for a photograph of

him amongst my dear mother's things is so like Walter Ashleigh."

"He told me his uncle lay under this imputation ; he believed, I think, deservedly. He will be glad indeed to know him innocent. Although they do not know anything of him, it is not pleasant to have a relative with such an unenviable notoriety. I may tell him, if he is not already aware of it, may I not ?"

"Certainly. Here's grandfather," she said. "I feel as if I must still call him so. Rupert, you will let me always know and love them, will you not ?"

"My darling ! Have they not been kind to you ? What stronger claims could they have on me ? They will be welcome guests always at the Priory."

"At the where ?" she asked, wonderingly.

Rupert smiled.

"I have a fancy to purchase the Priory. The Ashleighs wish to be rid of it. Should you mind living there?"

"No, no, indeed. Why, it will soften all the sorrow of these dear old folks to know I shall not be far from them. Oh, Rupert! it is too delightful."

And when the old man entered the room, and warmly shook Rupert's hand, only saying, shortly, "Take care on her," she told him, eagerly, how near she should still be to them; and he said then he'd try his hardest to forgive him for taking from him what was like the light of his eyes.

"Why, sir," said the old man, "no one can tell her worth that don't live with her. It ain't her face, though that's beautiful as the fairest flower i' the garden; but it's the winning ways, the cheery temper that nothing ruffles, the sense that sees always

what's right to be done, and the forgetting—as she do, sir—that there's such a person as herself at all : all her thoughts are for others—their comforts, their pleasure first. Nothing's a trouble to her to do for another, and she'll do you a favour as if you was a granting her one. That's her we've grown to love better than ourselves. We should grudge her to you, only we know that it is to make her happy ; and I can only say, sir, if she were the poor humble girl you first thought her, you'd 'a been a luckier man to win her love than if you'd have married an empress."

Madeleine had slipped away at the first words of this panegyric, and gone to help in getting the supper, which she still insisted on doing. Old Broderip was to drive Rupert to the Priory afterwards, for the rain was still falling in torrents.

The old farmer said he had scarcely ever

remembered such weather, and doubted, if it continued much longer, whether some severe mischief would not ensue. They talked of the fire, of Mr. Ashleigh's awful death, and of the funeral on the morrow. There would be a large following, he heard, for the young gentlemen were so respected, and the people would like to show how they felt for them. And so they chatted on, Rupert unwilling to leave, and they to spare him, until at length he said Walter might be worrying for him, and he must go. And so, with a lingering farewell and many last words, he left; and Madeleine stood in the porch till the last sound of the wheels had died away in the distance.

CHAPTER VI.

GERTRUDE had her wish. On every tiny branch and stem—on roofs and window ledges, banks and hedges, even the top of the weathercock on the church, the snow lay thick on Christmas morning. The Duke had finished his week's visit at the Manor House, and gone away before they heard what he had done for those whom the flood had so injured ; and with tears of joy, and face flushed with pleasure and excitement, May had heard blessings poured on the good Duke. They had worked with a good will ; and by his aid, Mistress Medlicott's, and some money sent anonymously, the mischief was all repaired before the

winter set in in good old-fashioned style. And May was looking forward to Christmas eve, to see Philip back again. An old friend of Mistress Medlicott's, with a tribe of young children, were to come, too, and help to fill the house, and make it ring with merry voices, as at Christmastide it should. And on the morning of the 24th the girls are all busy hanging up the holly, for Auntie keeps up all the good old fashions, and will have the house hung with holly and mistletoe, from top to bottom. May occasionally ceases from the work to look out of the window very long, of course, before Philip can be expected; but it is enough for her he is to come that day, and her impatience can be only stilled by watching for his arrival long before he had started.

“What a silly girl you are, May! Philip said he should come by the 5.30 train, and

it is not yet one," said Gertrude, who, perched on her favourite ladder in the library, was striving in vain to make Homer wear a wreath she had provided for him.

"I thought I heard wheels," said May, meekly.

"The baker, no doubt. Oh! what a slippery head this creature has got, to be sure. If it was as shiny inside as it is out, I wonder he ever kept anything in it. You are getting on, Lil, so much better than I am: I do not think this is in my style. I say, don't you long for the servant's ball? I do. Philip says he shall dance the first dance with Briggs, in token of his forgiveness about the letter."

"I think they would enjoy themselves a great deal better if we did not go near them," said Lilian; "it makes them so shy and awkward."

"Oh! but it is such fun. We need not

stay after the first quadrille ; but do let us go to that and see the dresses. Edith, give me up some more holly. What a lazy thing you are, reading there !”

“Gertrude, you know I can’t use my hand comfortably.”

“Oh ! I forgot, dear : I beg your pardon. But I think you rather trade upon that injury : it often gives you immunity from unpleasant tasks now, does it not ?”

“And so it should,” said May, warmly. “After all Edith did that day, she ought never to do another thing she does not like.”

“Thank you, May dear,” said Edith, smiling ; “mercy seldom tempers Gertrude’s justice. I own I am lazy—at least, that I am glad of a reasonable excuse to be quiet when I don’t want to move ; and my natural disinclination to exert myself is increased by the pain it gives me.”

"Ah! now, Edith; but I do wait on you and help you, don't I, more than any of them?"

"Yes, you're very kind in *that* way, I own."

"Ah! dear Doctor, you are come at a wish," said Gertrude, as Doctor Stillwell at that moment put his head in at the door.

"I want someone to help me, dreadfully."

"But, my dear young lady, my lecture is not nearly ready: I came in for a book."

"But it's holiday time, and nobody wants dry old lectures. Let me crown you King Christmas. Homer will not keep this wreath on his slippery head, so you must wear it. No, no; do not take it off—I've such an idea," and, springing down the ladder, she snatched a scarlet table-cover from a table near her, and threw it over his shoulders.

"Now you shall be dressed like that, with a

lovely white wig and beard, and give away the prizes in the school."

"Gertrude, you are too bad," said Lilian, assisting the Doctor to remove the prickly holly wreath, though she could not forbear smiling at his wry faces, and at his difficulty in saving his head at the expense of his fingers.

"She is a very mischievous little lady," said the good-natured old man, "and loves to make game of her old tutor."

"No, no ; I really meant you would look well dressed like that, and it would ~~so~~use the children ; would it not, Edith ? What is it ? what do you see ?" she continued, following Edith's eyes to the window, who, said softly :

"Mr. Prescott has just driven up to the door."

"Has he ? Oh, how delightful ! He shall stay to lunch, and we will make him work."

"We're nice tidy people to receive visitors," said Lilian ; "but ask him, May, if he will excuse ceremony, and come in here. Frere will show him into the drawing-room."

"Let me have my book and escape, then," said the Doctor.

"Ah! but stay: please to remember that you promised to tell me all the particulars of Kathleen O'Brian, *alias* Madeleine Fitzgerald, of which we have heard a hundred different accounts. When will you do that?"

"This evening, my dear lady, I promise. Let me go now;" and he made his escape as Prescott entered with May.

After the customary salutations, Gertrude at once asked him if he had come to luncheon, and felt inclined to help them?

"You see we are short-handed. Poor Edith's wrist is still too weak to do much."

"Not well yet?" he said; but it was Gertrude he asked, not Edith.

"No; is it not a tedious business? let's see; it's been done a month——"

"And four days," he said.

"You are precise, Mr. Prescott."

"I can never forget that day," he answered.

"Nor can any of us forget your share in it, Mr. Prescott," said Lilian.

He made no answer, but took up the wreath of holly which had adorned the poor Doctor, and asked where it was to go. Could he put it up for them?

"Can you? and will you stay, then?" said Gertrude.

"Do," said May; "Philip will be here presently."

"Thank you, if I'm not in the way."

"On the contrary, you'll be most useful, and you shall have some 'allowance,'" said

Gertrude, laughing. "Isn't that what the working-men ask for?"

"I believe so. Please set me to work. What can I do?"

"What's the matter with him?" whispered Gertrude to May, after she had given him his directions. "He's not a bit like himself, is he?"

"Not a bit. I can guess, I think."

"Is Mrs. Mostyn coming by the same train as Philip, Lilian?" asked Gertrude.

"No; they have such a distance to come, they will be only here in time for dinner."

"I wonder why, as she had such a hideous name of her own as Olivia, she inflicted still more frightful ones on her daughters?"

"What do you call hideous names, Gertrude?" said May.

"Why, Clara, Sophia, and Maria can't be

matched for ugliness, except at least by Olivia."

"I don't think Clara ugly, Gertrude; do you, Mr. Prescott?"

"It wouldn't be ugly hung like a festoon."

"What, Mr. Prescott?" said Gertrude, laughing.

"Did you not say this was ugly?" he said, pointing to a wreath lying on the ground.

"No; we were talking about names. We are expecting some friends this evening," explained Lilian, "and Gertrude was very severe on their baptismal appellations."

"Oh, I see. I beg your pardon. You see I was so engrossed by my work, I could not think of anything else."

"Exactly; but now we have recalled your senses, do tell us if you think those names are pretty—Clara, Sophia, and Maria?"

"I prefer Saxon names myself; but one's

love for names is only association, after all. One might think Sophonisba the most perfect name in the world."

"Oh dear! one *might*, perhaps; but it would indeed prove us to be under love's glamour to an alarming extent. Here is dear Auntie coming to see how we are getting on, and we have really done nothing."

"Are you come to help my girls?" said Mistress Medlicott, shaking hands warmly with him.

"I came to wish you a merry Christmas and many happy New Years," he said.

"Thank you, heartily. The same to you; and now, why need you go back again? Can you not stay all day, and dine here? They will not be uneasy about you, will they? We have your friend Philip and the Mostyns coming by-and-bye, and shall manage to make as much noise as we ought on Christmas eve."

“They will not be uneasy about me,” he said, glancing at Edith as he answered.

“But perhaps you have some Christmas gathering at home?” she said, as he seemed to hesitate.

“No, not at all. There are some associations at home connected with Christmas that prevent my mother caring to make merry there: dismal things have a knack of happening then, I think.”

“It seems to us so, because we are looking forward to the season as one of joy.”

“After the plum-pudding age, I think we don’t seem to care about it.”

“Not about Christmas, Mr. Prescott?” exclaimed Gertrude; “why, all ages, all nations—Christian nations—love it. It brings a joy of its own that overrides all personal griefs. Don’t you remember that exquisite description of Dickens’ Christmas in the light-house—those two poor

men out in the deep there, keeping it? Oh! I shall quarrel with you on that subject."

A little cry from May prevented further conversation; for standing peeping into the window was a face, which, spite of the large white comforter in which it was nearly buried, she saw was Philip, Duke of Claverton.

"What's brought you down so early?" asked the delighted May, when he had spoken to everyone.

"Well, I thought I'd come and spend a long day," he said, laughing. "No; but, really, I had nothing to do, and so I somehow fancied I should prefer being here. I came up from Claverton last night. It's looking splendid," he whispered to May. "I've made such a pretty room for 'somebody.' And how is the wrist, Edith?" he said, sitting down on the arm of her chair,

"I see you are not exerting yourself like the rest."

"No, I'm a very useless party, indeed, still."

"Strains are always such tedious things. I must go to work in your place. Look here, May, you and I will go and dress the drawing-room."

"If you find it dull, I'll come to you," said Gertrude, laughing as they passed her.

The short winter day passed quickly. The guests arrived, and the bustle of receiving them and showing them to their rooms occupied them until time to dress for dinner.

In the evening the Duke challenged Prescott to a game of billiards; but he refused on the plea of a headache, so he then said he would play four ladies, if they liked. This was readily and laughingly complied with; and the Mostyns, Ma'mselle, May, and Gertrude all went with him, the four ladies

selected to play being May and Gertrude, and Clara and Sophia Mostyn.

In her own especial corner sat Mistress Medlicott, with Mrs. Mostyn and Dr. Stillwell, chatting. Lilian went to the piano and played soft music, as though she were setting her thoughts to music; and Edith sat working, with some earnest, dark eyes looking at her, until her face grew hot beneath their fervent gaze: and she rose, and, throwing down her work, went to the piano and asked Lilian to sing a duet with her; but Prescott never moved or followed her—sat still where she had left him, toying with the things in her work-basket—the gold scissors, the thimble—taking up the lace she was making, and examining it as though he thoroughly understood it, and was looking if it was being properly done. Then he fell back in his chair, resting his head on the back of it, and remained so till she came again

to her place, which she did, having no cause to keep away longer and wanting her work.

He moved when she took her seat again, and said, in the low, persuasive tone in which he seemed always to speak to her now :

“Are you looking for this ? do you want it ?”

“My thimble ? yes, I am. Of course I want it.”

“What are those lines of Tennyson’s ?” he said, handing her the thimble. “‘I would I were the necklace,’ you know. The ‘Miller’s Daughter’ it is called, isn’t it ?”

“Yes, I believe so ; but I hate all that sentimental stuff. I never read poetry—at least, not that style.”

A pause, and then she worked very fast, and broke her cotton, and said, impatiently :

“Why don’t you go and play at billiards ?”

"I don't care about billiards."

"It must be more entertaining than sitting here watching me work."

"To me there is nothing so entertaining."

"On the principle of small minds being entertained with small things," she said, with a sort of laugh.

"Yes," he said, quietly, and his dark, liquid eyes still kept their watch on the white fingers tracing the rich lace pattern.

"Then I can only say, Mr. Prescott, that you will drive me to put my work away, for I hate to be watched doing anything."

"I am very sorry; I wish you had said so before;" and he got up and went into the other drawing-room, where Lilian still sat playing her dream-like music, and flung himself into a chair behind her.

"Oh! I am beaten to a mummy, Auntie darling," said Gertrude, flying into the room in her usual fashion, "and so I won't play

any more ; and Philip says he'll come and tell our fortunes—some delicious new game he's got of cards. You must have yours told, Doctor."

"Oh ! my dear Lady, mine is told long ago."

"Ah ! but you must be tired of that old one. Have a nice new one. Yes, do. Here they come. Now, Philip, if you do not predict the brightest, most glorious future for me in this world, I'll never forgive you."

"Very well ; now sit down in a magic circle all who would know what Fate has in store for them," and, seizing a paper-knife from the table, he waved it majestically, and the girls laughingly seated themselves as he directed.

"Where's Prescott, and Edith, and Lilian ? Come along. Will you not come and search the book of Fate, and hear what doom awaits you ?"

“Yes, do, girls. Come along, Mr. Prescott. Here, Lily, here is room next to me. Now we’re ready, Philip, begin. What are we to do? Isn’t it fun? Auntie dear, don’t you hope the fates will be propitious?”

“Yes, Birdie; but those are bold who draw aside the veil of futurity: it is said to have been woven by the hands of Mercy.”

“Well, perhaps so; but then Mercy had no pity for the curious. Go on, Philip.”

“Are you anxious to hear your fate, Lady Edith?” asked Prescott, whilst the Duke made elaborate preparations for his fortune-telling.

“No; I can guess it.”

“I wish I could mine,” he said. “It would save me much anxiety.”

“It is scarcely worth while to be anxious about that which we can neither avert nor control.”

“But if our fate hangs on the cast of a

die, do we not watch the throw with an agony of expectation ?”

“ I don’t know ; I was never in such an unpleasant predicament, that I am aware. Were our fates in our own hands, we should make a sad muddle of them. It is better to take patiently the goods the gods provide, and make the best of our share.”

“ Your philosophy is enviable, Lady Edith.”

“ Is it ? It is perfectly attainable, Mr. Prescott ; but, see—Philip is ready. Perhaps your future may turn out as bright as you desire.”

“ Now then, ladies and gentlemen,” said the Duke, “ in these cards which I hold in my hand your fates are written. Calmly, gravely, seriously, choose each a number, and then you shall hear what bright or bitter doom is yours. Gertrude, you are first. A number.”

“ Oh dear ! I’m frightened ! seven, then.”

"The mystic number seven. Well then, seven: '*You will shortly have a great surprise.*'"

"Dear, how nice! I like to be surprised."

"Now—come, Lilian."

"Nine."

"'*A long cherished wish you will not obtain.*' Now, Dr. Stillwell."

"Oh, no, no! it is for the young ones; do not include me."

"Then Edith."

"Fourteen."

"'*A crisis of your fate approaches.*'"

"Dear me! how very alarming!"

"Prescott, come—a number."

"Eleven."

"Ha! ha! you poor marytr! '*Give up your present intentions, or you will for ever rue it.*'"

"Foolery! no more of such bosh for me," he said, getting up from his seat and walking away.

"I can't compliment you on the cleverness of your cards, Philip," said Mistress Medlicott, who had sat smilingly listening.

"No. I am not impressed myself; but I suppose all would like to try."

"Oh, yes!" said the Mostyns; "we must hear our fates."

Two or three equally vague answers fell to their share, and then a new game was proposed.

"You know we must be frivolous to-night, Auntie," said the Duke.

"By all means. Have a game at Post; that will suit the young ones, I'm sure."

And so a noisy game of romps ensued, all playing with a good will but Prescott, who continually sat down and declared he could not play.

"What an awful muff you are to-night, Syd! What on earth ails you?" said the Duke to him, in a low voice.

"I cannot help it, Philip. Get me five minutes' speech alone with Edith to-night, or I shall go mad ; do manage it, somehow."

"Halloa !" said his friend, "is that it ? I say, I'm afraid you'll burn your fingers. I wouldn't if I were you."

"I must. She thinks I'm fooling and trifling with her, I know. Let me tell her the truth, and be kicked out—it's better than this, anyhow."

"Well, I don't know how to get you a chance, but I'll try. Auntie, I don't think it will be a real Christmas eve without a snap-dragon," he said ; "may I order one ?"

"Yes, if you like, my dear boy—certainly."

"Hurrah ! jolly !" cried the Mostyn boys ; and in a few moments they were all in the dining-room in the dark, with the bowl of burning fluid on a table in the centre. Philip had whispered to Prescott :

"Ask her to stay and speak to you when I am marshalling all the rest out of the room; but you're a fool, old fellow, I tell you."

When the moment came to throw the salt into the bowl, the Duke looked up and wondered if Edith's face, who had just entered the room, was really as deathly white as it looked, or was the salt only in fault.

"Where's Mr. Prescott?" asked Auntie, when they returned to the drawing-room.

"His head was so very bad—he is gone," explained Edith, in a voice meant to be very calm; but Lilian turned suddenly and looked at her, and taking her hand, which was as cold as death, in hers, she gave it a gentle pressure.

"Now, Dr. Stillwell," said Gertrude, "for your story. Let us all sit comfortably round and hear it."

"What story do you mean?" said Mistress Medlicott.

"A little village gossip that her Ladyship delights in," said the Doctor, smiling.

"Auntie, I told you, you know, that the meadow beauty I used to rave of turns out to be a lady. It's a real romance, and the Doctor has found out all the truth, and has promised to tell me to-night. Now, Doctor, go on."

Laughing, the Doctor sat down beside Gertrude, and told her all he knew of Madeleine's history.

"And now," he said, "I have some more news to tell you. Captain Carrington—you remember him, the Ashleigh's friend at the picnic, you know——"

There was a slight movement among them as he uttered this name, and Lilian got up and went to shut the piano.

"Yes; well, go on," said Gertrude.

"Captain Carrington has bought the Priory. The Ashleighs wish to leave, and he has bought it."

"And is he coming here to live?"

"Yes; he has sold out of the army, and intends living like a country gentleman. You will hear a strange tale of him when he comes here, but at present I am not at liberty to say more."

"A strange tale! Oh! now, Doctor, that is cruel. Can't you tell us?"

"No, my dear lady; I am pledged to secrecy. I can only assure you that it has increased the good opinion I at first formed of him, and that I think he is a very noble young man."

"Oh dear! I shall really expire with curiosity," said Gertrude. "Edith, ain't you dying to know what it is? And those two stupid creatures whispering together are not in the least interested. May, haven't

you heard what the Doctor has been telling?"

"I heard something about Captain Carrington taking the Priory; but I did not care much about it."

"Oh! of course not. It can't signify to you; but think of us poor things, you selfish creature. We are still allowed to feel an interest in handsome young men."

"I'm afraid if I was to tell you all I know, or perhaps I should say, all I *guess*," said the Doctor, "your interest might not be so strong."

"Oh! pray do not blight Gertrude's hopes, Doctor," said May. "Ever since Captain Carrington wore in his hat some buttercups she threw at him she has been indulging in day-dreams about him!"

"May, what a shame! Please don't believe her, Doctor."

"I will take it as it is meant—for an

innocent joke," said the good old Doctor ;
"but the Captain has paid so many visits to Broderip's farm, that when he talked to me of the probability of some mistress reigning at the Priory—which, as he said, would make it so bright—I, as they say, put two and two together, and drew my own conclusions."

"Well, this is a delightful romance ! I'll take it for the foundation of a novel," said Gertrude. "This is the surprise you predicted for me, Philip."

"I am sorry it is so unpleasant a one, Gertrude."

"Oh ! but it is not at all unpleasant, because you know, next to his marrying me, the most exciting thing is his marrying someone else !"

"Gertrude, what a wild puss you are !" said Mistress Medlicott. "You will quite shock Mrs. Mostyn."

But Mrs. Mostyn smiled, and said Lady Gertrude was very merry, and it was just the age to be so; and then she thought it must be really time to go to bed, which remark awoke the Doctor to the idea that it was time for him to go home; and so, wishing them all good-night, and promising to let Gertrude know the moment he had any certain intelligence, he took his departure; and the drawing-room was soon emptied of its guests, and in an hour's time all were sleeping save two.

Lilian and Edith sat over the fire in their room, talking.

May and Gertrude had both said they were sleepy, and went at once to bed; but Edith said, "Do stay a little while, Lilian—I want to talk to you."

"Do you, love? I think I can tell *you* all you want to tell *me*. You have refused Mr. Prescott and are glad, or you have

accepted him and are sorry. Which is it?"

"Not exactly either, Lilian. Why could we not have gone on as we were? why did he want to be so silly? and now he'll never come again—and—and——" and to Lilian's astonishment, Edith dropped her head on her shoulders, and burst into tears.

She did not speak to her for a moment or two. She knew some strong feeling must have moved Edith to tears, and was convinced it was the old story—that she had said "No" when she meant "Yes"; but she knew it was no use to force her confidence, so she only said, quietly :

"Darling, one great consolation in all worries is that, as dear Auntie says, 'all is ordered, and all is right, whatever it is.'"

Edith looked up suddenly, and said :

"Dear, dear Lilian, I'm a selfish wretch, for you have worries, *I* know, worse than

mine. You dear, patient, pretty, brave darling ! Kiss me, and let us go to bed and try to sleep, to forget our troubles, at least for to-night."

Lilian made no answer, but kissed her fondly, and Edith did not know if they were her own tears or Lilian's that wetted her cheeks.

CHAPTER VII.

THE Library at the Priory has assumed a very different aspect to its customary one of comfort and luxury. Large chests are standing about lined with paper, ready to receive the books ; the busts and statues are draped in matting ; heaps of torn letters and circulars fill the waste-paper baskets ; the fire is nearly out—no one has time to put on fresh logs ; the dreadful confusion of “ packing up ” is going on throughout the house.

Perhaps, if any one who had known Mr. Ashleigh had gone into Everard’s room, they would have been startled to see him sitting there apparently alive and well ; and Dolly herself gave a little cry when she entered it,

but was re-assured by Everard's gentle, "My Uncle, Dolly."

He sat a long time in earnest talk with Everard; and, though much that he said was very painful for him to hear, there was one comfort mingled with it, the assurance that his innocence of the crime imputed to him had been proved, and that no stain rested on the name of this only remaining relative.

He said he could not speak of his lost brother in harsh terms to his son, nor would he to any one on earth betray what he knew against him—he would bury it in his grave; but he said his unhappy brother had made his life for many years a torture to him; that he had defrauded him of large sums of money; and the only way he could ever get him to repay a farthing, was by threatening to expose what he knew of him.

"I have been a ne'er-do-well myself," he

said, "all my life; but *I* have only been my own enemy. Penniless as I had rendered myself, I was compelled, to get bread to eat, to give up to your father a packet of letters which would have betrayed the secret it was his life's aim to keep. Poor creature! they were his death, it appears, for in burning them the accident, no doubt, happened. He told me he had an access to that wing no one knew of, and that there he kept documents which he feared might fall into the hands of his son. Considering his life of wrong-doing, it was wonderful how anxious he was to be thought all that is admirable."

This was all the information Everard could obtain from his uncle; but before he left, Everard had promised to make him an allowance for his life, which he gratefully accepted, and said he should go to Ireland and pass the remainder of his days, where he had had the only gleam of happiness in his life.

“Think of me,” he said, “with pity more than contempt. You need no warning, for goodness is written in your face and that of your brother, or my wasted life might be one to you. Stopping short of actual crime, I have followed only the suggestions of my own fancy, without principle or religion; and here I am, a miserable old man, going to my grave unloved and uncared for by any human being. My unfortunate brother was less scrupulous and more courageous in his transactions. He managed to escape detection by his astuteness, and that assumption of great respectability and sense of honour, which made him regarded as a person of unimpeachable integrity; and his sudden and fearful death—destroying all proofs of his nefarious proceedings, as well as his own life—will, mercifully for you, I trust, prevent any inheritance of shame falling on you. I think, by what he said, that his love for

his daughter made him very anxious that nothing to his discredit should ever be discovered; and in Australia he did not go by his own name. Sometimes I fancy that the fire was no accident, but that, distracted by his fears of exposure, he thus escaped from it."

"I have had some such idea myself; but that we shall never know now," Everard answered. "We fancied our butler was in his confidence; but, if so, at any rate he will tell nothing."

And so the interview ended; and no more on earth did Everard hold intercourse with him, whose wasted life and desolate old age he would often recall and mourn over.

Walter was much better, but his good looks were much impaired by the singeing of eyebrows and eyelashes. The burn on the cheek was very slight, and had left no scar; but still Everard thought his brother altered

—very gentle, calm, and self-possessed, as usual; but the brightness, the quiet fun, seemed gone, and he appeared, indeed, to have passed through the fire. Whether he would remain thus altered, Everard could not quite believe. He hoped it was only the reaction after the great excitement, and that the old manner which somehow characterized him the most, and without which he scarcely seemed “Walter,” would some day return.

“I have sent off the uncle, Walter,” said Everard, entering his brother’s room; “he told me he had wished you good-bye.”

“Yes; he wished me good-bye. Poor fellow!”

“Dreadfully to be pitied, is he not?”

“Yes; he was young, and fresh, and full of heart and hope, Everard, once.”

“Yes, Walter; and then he weakly gave himself up to a love which he should never have acknowledged, even to himself. Instead

of fighting against it, getting some engrossing employment which would shut it out, he indulged himself in the sweet torture of daily seeing her, and so wrecked his life."

"Yes—not wise, was it?" said Walter. He was tearing up old letters, and he continued doing so for some time in silence. At length he said: "Look here, Everard, in an old blotting-book of our poor father's, stuck down in the pocket, I found this. I wonder if it throws any light on the transactions of which Uncle Everard speaks, that were of a shady character? It appears to me the rough copy of a letter;" and he handed it to his brother.

Sentences were erased, and it was hurriedly and badly written; but these words in his father's writing were distinct: "Do not worry yourself. I keep the same name till I am in London. There is no suspicion: everyone thinks the bank broke

honestly. You now are the only person alive in the secret. Keep it, as you value your life. I am rich and independent: you shall never want. The cheque I enclose more than repays you. I shall have the death of Mr. A—— put in the papers; so, if by any unforeseen chance suspicion is directed to him, they will scarcely think it worth while to pursue a dead man.”

“Why, Walter, of course. Do you remember—but perhaps you do not; you were very young—my mother reading in the paper an account of the stoppage of a bank in Australia, and the immediate departure of the manager, and that there was suspicion of foul play on his part? I recollect it well, for my father grew deadly white, snatched the paper from my mother’s hand, and then, with a strange laugh, said: ‘What lies newspapers tell!’ It is impressed on my mind, because, with

boyish ideas, what was in print *I* had always thought must be true."

"I do not recollect the circumstance, myself," answered Walter; "but it seems that there is certainly connection with these two," he said, pointing to the letter. "However, he is out of reach of any punishment here, and for beyond—"

"Of that we dare not think," said Everard; "only remember, with infinite gratitude, how great is Divine mercy."

"We had better burn this, Everard," said Walter, taking up the letter.

"Decidedly—at once;" and, in a moment, the letter which had seemed to them so sad a proof of their father's guilt was in ashes.

"Are you expecting Carrington to-night, Walter?" said Everard, at length.

"Yes; he said he should probably be down."

“That’s a strange story too, old fellow, is it not?”

“What, about his father?”

“His whole story, I mean, Walter: that he should have loved a girl whom he thought was in humble life—knowing himself to have sprung from so homely a stock that the marriage could scarcely be called a *mésalliance*—and then discovering that she was a lady of birth and education. His coming here to see us, and finding his father, all is so strange and romantic.”

“Yes.”

“He is one of those whom some good genius seems to watch over; everything turns out well for him.”

“Yes,” again repeated Walter.

“Why, old fellow, you are very laconic this evening. Does not this subject interest you?” said Everard, smiling slightly.

“Too much, perhaps, Everard.”

"I will not force your confidence," said Everard, gravely, "for I am sure—if help in any difficulty or trouble were needed—you would surely come to me. It is only because I cannot help you in your trouble that you do not tell me, is it not?" he said, laying his hand kindly on his brother's arm; "for that you are troubled beyond the sorrow we mutually share I am sure."

"You cannot help me, old man; but I shall try to help myself," answered Walter. "I shall," he continued, with a faint attempt at a smile, "take up some engrossing employment which will shut it out, and not indulge myself in any sweet torture. Two wrecks in one family will not do, will it?"

"No, no, Walter; but it requires courage of a high order to laugh above the ruins of hopes such as yours. But when we remember, among such ruins the noblest graces may be fostered—resignation, forbearance,

and forgiveness—Walter, we have some recompense even here.”

“I have nothing to forgive, Everard,” said Walter, eagerly; “remember *that* always—from either of them. At this moment they know less than you do. Do not let this foolish matter vex you, old man. It will end; and when I am a grey-headed bachelor, I shall laugh at this, with all the rest of my boyish follies. Do not let us talk of it any more.”

And they never did. It was all Everard ever knew of his brother's sharpest trial; for, though so often made the subject of a jest, perhaps there are few things harder to bear in this life of many sorrows than awakening to the conviction that your idea of all earthly happiness is centred in one who in return has no thought nor care for you; to feel that all that was once joy and gladness is now dreary and uninteresting,

because the one you cared to share it with makes gladness for some other heart than yours ; to know that the eyes, which are like no others to you, will never light with joy at your approach ; the voice and step, which had power to make your heart beat at their sound, are making another's vibrate ; and that you are only one, amongst the many, to the being who is the only one in the world to you.

Walter had, since he first knew Madeleine, been struggling against this feeling, for he had, of course, at first thought the idea of marrying her preposterous ; and now, when he learnt she was his equal in birth and position, and his friend—"his own familiar friend"—had taken her from him, it seemed to him at first almost more than he could bear. But he did bear it—with courage and magnanimity. It would have been excusable if he had felt some irritation against

Madeleine, unjust though it might have been—for he had never whispered one word of love to her—and if he had lost some of his old affectionate feeling for his friend, who had thus stepped in between him and happiness. But no such feelings mingled with his sorrow. He, who was so specially particular about women, had seen for the first time one who had haunted his dreams; whose face was for ever before him; whose voice—that bright, musical voice—for ever seemed ringing in his ears. He had found himself repeating her simplest words, and trying to find—even whilst he dreaded to do so—that beneath them lurked some tender feeling for himself; and not because all that he deemed most excellent in woman was united in her—that he had never stopped to ask or think; nor did he know himself how the beautiful face with the radiant eyes lived in his heart, till honour

compelled him to banish it. He would have gone on, content to see her, to pass some moments of each week in her society, for ever secure, as he thought himself, from danger, by the idea of her inferior rank, and the folly of imagining she could ever be his wife. Lulled in this fancied security, his only anxiety had been for her—lest his visits might affect her peace of mind—little dreaming how he was risking his own. And now it was all over: from his dream he was rudely awakened. The happiness which he had indulged in—without thinking it could ever end, without knowing how he should miss it when it did—would never be his again; but anger against either of those who had thus dimmed the brightness of his life he never felt for one moment. Let Rupert only make her happy—only care for her, watch over her, give up his life to her, as he would have done—and then he would

never regret that he had loved his friend so long, or his friend's wife so well.

When the truths had first dawned on him that he loved Madeleine, and that she was lost to him—that evening that his friend came to tell him of his new found happiness, he had lain awake some hours. He had looked at his sorrow from all points, and then said: “There is no way out of this—it has got to be borne; I will bear it.” And so he did—with the courage and the calmness which were essential marks of his character; losing only, in his struggle, the manner due to the light-heartedness which had gone, as he felt, for ever, and which his graver brother had been the first—as he would probably be the only one—to notice.

The astonishment and excitement of the village at the news, which, as it were, flooded it, is better imagined than described. At the farrier's forge—in the shop at the

corner of the street—at the Chequers Inn—at the beerhouse—the stories were told again and again. “Master Poyntz—the father of that handsome gentleman, Captain Carrington! Little Kathleen—a lady born and bred, with a sight of money, going to marry him and live at the Priory!—it was wonderful!”

Some there were who said she had been conceited enough before; there would be no bearing her now. But Jane Broderip did not say so, as Madeleine knelt by her arm-chair in the Alms-houses, telling her, in her bright voice, with her glad eyes looking eagerly into her face, how she should be such a welcome guest always in the Priory; how she must come and sit beneath the trees in the golden summer time, and bring away store of flowers, to ornament her little room; and how in the winter, by the blazing wood fire, she

should sit and chat with her of old times, and eat her Christmas dinner in the fine old kitchen ; so that "Aunt Jane" would, after all, see more of her than before. And the old woman, bending down, could only press her lips on the fair forehead and murmur a blessing on her who had, for more than a twelvemonth, made the world seem brighter to her. And many more—who learned now, for the first time, that their spoilt furniture and damaged goods, injured in the flood, had been replaced by her ; that some money, sent anonymously (besides that so nobly contributed by the Duke and Mistress Medicott), was hers—blessed her too, so that to her new home the young bride came laden with the blessings of the poor she had comforted and cheered, which, we may believe, purchased for her "that blessing which maketh rich and addeth no sorrow with it."

CHAPTER VIII.

CHRISTMAS had passed away. The cold winds, and sleet, and snow had gone, and were replaced by mild rains and gentler breezes. The birds had chosen their mates, and begun to build their nests in hedges and trees. Violets and primroses peeped from their leaves, to see if they might venture forth ; and all nature was, as it were, waking up to fresh new life. All were full of excitement, and busy active life, too, in the Manor House. May was to be married on the 30th of April. The Duke had proposed the month of May, saying it was the right one for her to be married in ; but she had quoted the French saying to him—

“Noce de Mai noce fatale”—and said it was a superstition of many nations: so, as usual, he had bent to her will, and the day was fixed as she wished.

May was bright and happy, singing about the house in concert with the birds outside; Lilian glad in her happiness; Edith continually saying she wondered how people could be so absurd as to marry, to be the slaves of another's will; and tossing her regal-looking head, and smiling with amusement—as one smiles at a child's glee over some toy — as Gertrude surveyed with ecstasy each box-full of dresses, and laces, and bonnets, and gloves, and all the varied garments which comprise the “trousseau.” One large room was set apart to contain the things, and the bride's presents; and Gertrude passed much of her time there. She superintended the unpacking, and the trying on of everything; and when the

wedding dress itself arrived, her excitement was unbounded. First she begged May to put it all on, veil and all, and come down to Auntie ; then she said that was ill luck, that must not be, but she must have it all laid on the bed, just as it was to be worn ; and May must promise faithfully she would be photographed in it some day, on purpose for *her*—nothing but this great, eventful day could she think of. The moment it was fixed she had never rested till her own dress and that of her sisters' was decided on. May had made her very unhappy and half angry by the long time she took to settle this knotty point, but when it was once arranged she was quite satisfied, and said she would now abandon herself to the enjoyment of seeing May's dresses, as her own was so satisfactorily off her mind.

May wished the wedding to be quiet,

and at Haseley Mere—not in London, as was first proposed ; so Mistress Medicott took the house from the 2nd of May for the season, and Gertrude, with a sigh of relief, said all joy would not end with the wedding, then ; there would be her own “coming-out” immediately afterwards, which was a great blessing.

“It will be a blessing to your friends if someone carries you off,” said Edith.

“Do not be so severe on the child,” said Lilian, putting her arm round Gertrude’s neck.

“She is such an inveterate chatterbox,” said Edith. “She keeps on talk, talk, talk, till she makes one’s head in a whirl.”

“We should sadly miss the chatter if it were gone,” said Lilian, tenderly. “I remember longing—with a very painful longing—to hear her merry tongue again.”

"Oh! when she was ill? Yes, I don't want the poor chick to be ill," said Edith; "but she is like Tennyson's brook, *she* 'goes on for ever, ever.'"

"Like the brook—refreshing to those who are beside it, eh, Gertrude?"

"Thank you, Lily dear; you are always my champion," answered Gertrude.

"Everyone's champion who is wronged or oppressed; everyone's comforter who is sorry or sad—the sweetest, wisest, best in all the world," said May, actually stopping in a letter she was writing to Philip to run and kiss her sister.

"Dear, dear! the compliments which are passing are quite overpowering," said Edith; "no one favours me with a polite speech."

"You send away those——" began Gertrude; but a warning glance from Lilian stopped her, and she changed the con-

versation quickly to the one prevailing topic.

“What shall you do if Lady Evelina can’t come to be your fourth bridesmaid, May?”

“Ask Alice Mornington.”

“Then Helen and Geraldine will expect to be asked?”

“Oh, no! Alice is my friend, and I shall say I am only going to have four.”

“I think you ought to have ten, May,” said Edith. “If one must go through the miserable business, I would have either as grand a show as I could possibly have, or just walk off into church with the unhappy being who was going to be my husband, with the pew-opener for a witness.”

“But the unhappy being might object to that arrangement,” said Lilian, laughing.

“That would make no difference till after the ceremony: his making objections

to anything I chose to do, would be an absurd waste of breath, you may depend on it. I should say 'I won't' until I was compelled to say 'I will.'"

"Oh, Edith! I think it is so nice to have someone always to tell us what to do," said May; "someone we love and believe in, you know. I hate what people call independence: I feel so frightened when I do what I like, without asking anyone first."

"I should be a long time before I loved and believed in anyone enough to make me give up my own ideas of right and wrong to them."

"Edith, you belie yourself," said Lilian. "None of us have been more strictly obedient to Auntie than you have."

"Ah! that's another affair. I was in Auntie's care before I had any will of my own; and she claims my obedience from love

and gratitude ; but I don't like it—no one ever loved their own way so much as I."

"Or regretted having it more, eh, Edith?" whispered Lilian.

"No ; I'm by no means sure I do. All this fuss, which I could never put up with, has made me glad now," she answered, in the same tone.

"You will forgive me for doubting it?"

"Oh ! yes ; and I will own you are right, if I ever alter my mind."

"A little strong pleading would do it," said Lilian, smiling.

"There does not appear the slightest inclination to try it," said Edith, tossing her head ; "I think the gentleman repents his haste, and is glad I did not take advantage of it."

"Oh ! you must not be hard on him, Edith : I think he behaves beautifully. He just calls, that Auntie and the rest of us

may not think his absence remarkable, and treats you as though you were an empress."

"Yes; and with the same distance."

"There I think he is right; they are all asked to the wedding, you know."

"Yes, of course: poor, dear Auntie wondered to me the other day why he was never now in such good spirits."

"Did she? She suspects, I think: and if so, she is disappointed, for some time ago she said how she should like him for a nephew."

"Humph! Perhaps Gertrude may take compassion on him."

"Did I hear my name? What are you two cogitating over?"

"You have been so delightfully quiet for so long, Gertrude, that I really feel inclined to give you a penny," said Edith.

"Thank you, ma'am; I'd rather not, said Little Fairy *me*," answered Gertrude, parody-

ing the song. "I never sell my thoughts so cheaply, if that's what you mean ; and if it is a reward for my silence, I do not consider it half enough for such self-sacrifice as keeping my unruly member quiet for ten minutes ; but I am now going to relieve you of my presence, for Briggs says Auntie wants me."

All that could possibly be done, or bought in the village, in connexion with the wedding, May begged might be ; and, in some way or other, all who could be employed were given something to do. And now, as the time approached, a grand deputation waited on the Vicar to know what might be done in the way of decoration of church and village. He at once gave leave for any amount, if he might be allowed to have a voice in it ; and accordingly they went diligently to work, and arches were raised, and banners waved, inscribed with blessings on

the young pair; and in the church hot-house flowers and ferns, begged from every conservatory near, were disposed in beautiful devices, and crimson druggett laid along the aisles, and down the walk to the Lych gate; and Mistress Medlicott ordered new clothes for the infant-school children, and a dinner for the three schools, to be held in Farmer Scratton's large tithe-barn, which had to be dressed up too; and such a demand for green and pink calico and white ribbon had not been known in Haseley Mere for years. They worked with a good will till late in the evening, and began as soon as it was light in the morning, so that by ten o'clock all was in readiness. It had been windy for some days previously, but the anxiously-watched-for dawn broke soft and misty, with a fair promise of a bright day. The sun, seemingly unwilling to be outdone by all the splendour prepared for the young bride,

shone out gloriously; and the prayers of those who had such good cause to pray for the welfare of the inhabitants of the Manor House, seemed likely to be answered—that the sun might shine on the young bride, as a good omen for her happiness.

Philip had come down the day before to Oatlands; and he and Prescott were to come together to Haseley Mere, and breakfast with Dr. Stillwell, who had, with great humbleness and nervous trepidation, offered the use of his cottage; and the Duke, with that charming graciousness, that earnest manner of accepting the smallest civility, which made it such a pleasure to do the slightest service for him, and with all the tact of the perfect gentleman he was, eagerly said that it was the very thing he should like. The good old Doctor had an excellent breakfast arranged in his pleasant room; and from thence, with a somewhat white

face, Philip walked with Prescott to the church.

How long she seemed coming ! Surely there must be some mistake. He went twice to the door and looked out, meeting the eager gaze of two or three village children looking in, to whom, in a reckless and utterly unmeaning manner, he gave some silver.

At last a sound of wheels—the first carriage—*Mistress Medlicott*, with *Gertrude* and *Edith*, and the Duke's young brother, *Lord Harold Murray* ; another quickly following, containing *Ma'mselle*, with *Lilian* and *Lady Evelina Gordon*, and then the four bridesmaids stand in the porch waiting for the bride, while the rest of the company go into church. She comes—a sweet tearful smile on her ruddy lips, bowing to the acknowledgments of the school children, and the murmured blessings of the aged poor ; and on *Sir John Prescott's* arm, who is to act *Father* on the occasion,

she enters the church, and walks in a sort of dream up the crowded aisle. She scarcely sees or knows who is beside her, until, at the words, "Wilt thou take this woman to be thy wedded wife?" she feels her small hand held in a tender grasp, and then she ventures to raise her eyes once to his face—his white face; and as the words are said in turn to her, she can scarcely believe it is her own voice that so clearly rings through the church in that simple but solemn "I will," so earnest, so clear was its sound, that one old man said:

"Ah! I wish they all meant it loike that, there'd be an end of that ere divorce court."

And now it is over, the solemn words are spoken—they are man and wife till death shall part them; and the little tempers, and the failings and shortcomings, must now be borne on either side and mutually forgiven, until the end.

Then there was the peal of bells, the cheering of the village boys, the strewing with flowers, the congratulations of the friends, the breakfast and the toasts, the laying aside the rich, white satin dress for the pretty, quiet travelling dress with the magnificent Indian shawl—a wedding present from her brother-in-law, and then the parting, the many repeated kisses and last words, the shaking hands with the servants ranged in the hall, the old shoe thrown over the carriage, the last wave of the little lace handkerchief as the carriage turns into the road ; and then May only seems to wake out of a dream, and to believe she is really the Duchess of Claverton, and “dear Philip’s” wife, by which name he has called her ever since they left the church in every sentence he has spoken.

Mistress Medlicott had arranged that a few intimate friends should remain all day,

and, with those staying in the house, they made up a large party. They wandered about the grounds, and amused themselves as they best could in that desultory style which is the only way in which people can pass their time after the great excitement of a wedding ; and after dinner, which it was agreed should be earlier than usual, they begged to dance.

Mr. Prescott had, during the whole day, devoted himself to Mistress Medlicott ; and now, when the dancing began, he busied himself to get people partners, but would not dance himself. Once Lilian, with a kindly smile, asked him to dance with her, but he said, " No "—he had grown old and serious, and had given up such frivolities ; so that, unless he could get anything for any one, or make himself useful in any way, he never moved from the side of Mistress Medlicott's arm-chair. To

Edith he never spoke ; only at times his dark eyes were fixed on her with a sad, wistful look, which might have touched the proud spirit of the girl if she had seen it.

“ Mr. Prescott,” said Gertrude once in the evening, “ I want a partner for such a nice, pretty girl—do come and dance. Why *are* you so lazy ? ”

“ I have been explaining to Lady Lilian,” he said, looking up with his old pleasant smile at the bright face, which always courted smiles, “ that I have grown old and serious, and have abandoned the frivolities unbecoming my years.”

“ How very slow of you. Everyone is asking if you are ill.”

“ Yes ; tell them very ill—dying, I believe.”

“ Now, that’s naughty ; I shall say nothing of the kind. I shall say you are idle ; and, as idleness is the root of all evil,

I shall bid everyone avoid you as a dangerous character."

"Exactly; evil communications are worth two in the bush, and all that kind of thing."

"Silly person ! I shall leave you."

"To me," said Mistress Medicott. "He is very kind to me, and keeps me amused, so that I shall not grow cross and break up your evening too soon."

"Darling, you don't know how to be cross !" said Gertrude, stooping to kiss her Aunt ; and away she flew like a bird, and was soon spinning round the room to the last new waltz with Lord Harold Murray, who had been making many ineffectual attempts to dance with her, and had told his brother twenty times in the morning that she was "the jolliest girl he'd ever seen," and had imparted the information to several more friends in the evening, and had hovered

about after her so incessantly, with a request that she would dance with him, that she at length begged young Mostyn, to whom she was engaged for this waltz, to let her exchange it for a quadrille, and quiet this persevering suppliant with his dance. Young Mostyn consented with a rather ill grace, and assured her he was "an awful duffer—couldn't dance an ounce"; he knew him well—he'd been in the same house with him at Eton.

"Eton does spoil fellows sometimes," said Gertrude, mischievously. "I remember you such a nice little boy, and I'm sure Lord Harold was charming when I saw him three or four years ago;" and away she ran, laughing at her somewhat discomfited friend.

When the company at length began to break up, Prescott said to Mistress Medlicott, as he rose also to take his leave :

"I must bid you a long farewell. You are going to town until August, Lady Lilian tells me."

"We are; but are you not going to town? I understood your mother you were."

"They are, I believe; but I don't affect London. I shall probably go over the water a little while—I don't mean at the Queen's expense."

"No, I hope not; but I trust a guilty conscience is not the cause of the loss of some of that brightness which used to be so inspiring."

"Yes—you are right: it is," he said, "guilty of a great perversity. I had been warned against a folly, and yet I obstinately persisted in committing it, and so I will go away and try to forget it."

"If the folly was committed here," said Mistress Medicott, taking his hand in both

of hers, "I am very sorry, because I should not wish you to forget the Manor House, or have anything but pleasant associations with it."

"I have heard of a pleasant *pain*," he said. "At any rate, I shall never forget the Manor House or its inhabitants, though I may strive to forget the folly connected with it. After that touching speech," he said, trying to resume his old light manner, "I will say good-night. I hope you will get good news of the travellers—I dare say Philip will write to me. Good-night." As he passed Edith, who was seated near the door with Lord Harold, Gertrude, young Mostyn, and one of his sisters, he stopped for a moment, and then, holding out his hand to Gertrude, he said :

"Good-night. Good-bye—that is——"

"Oh ! good-bye for the present, Mr.

Prescott ; we shall see you in town, of course ? ”

“ I think not ; I am going abroad this season—I have been asked to join a large party.”

Edith turned to Charles Mostyn, and made some remark to him in a quick excited manner, and continued talking to him until Prescott had twice repeated, in a voice which, in spite of his greatest efforts, had a sad ring in it :

“ Good-bye, Lady Edith.”

“ Oh ! I beg your pardon—good-night. Are you all going ? What a pity we have not had Sir Roger de Coverley. Won’t you stay if I get it up ? ”

He did not answer ; and she looked up at him—at his white, grave, almost stern face ; and as her own grew crimson beneath his glance, she dropped her head, that haughty head which had never been so

meekly bowed before ; and though he saw her lips move, he did not hear the answer to his once more repeated :

“ Good-bye, Lady Edith.”

CHAPTER IX.

IN a small but elegant house, in the West End of London,—in the pretty drawing-room, with its windows opening into a balcony, gay and fragrant with mignonette and scarlet geraniums, looking out into the Park, filled with carriages, equestrians, and pedestrians, sit two ladies, one working, or meaning to work; the other reading, or meaning to read; but the scene is so attractive and gay, that continually the two things they had intended to occupy themselves with are lying idly in their laps. They are both in deep mourning, but no sadness is in either face. They have been laughing gaily, like two merry girls,

though one is a widow in the meridian of life, the other a young girl of eighteen, and her daughter.

“Oh! mother darling, do not imitate him any more. My sides really ache with laughing.”

“It is very wrong of you to laugh, Gracie, when the man is so devoted to you.”

“Please don’t say so; at any rate, he is doomed to a tremendous disappointment, for I could not marry a being whose r’s are all w’s.”

“But, my dear Grace, think of the three letters he has to make up for this deficiency —*£ s. d.* in abundance.”

“No, mother, I could not do it; besides, I tell you that I never have yet seen anyone whom I could think for a moment worth comparing with *you*, or whom I could love well enough to leave you for.”

“Silly little woman!” said her mother,

smiling ; “ but I have no doubt the Fairy Prince will come some day. But I am well contented his advent should be a long way off: we are very happy now, darling, are we not ? ”

“ Indeed we are,” answered Grace, earnestly. “ The boys dine at home to-night, do they not ? ”

“ Oh, I hope so. I asked Everard not to engage himself, and to tell Walter not; but when I said I had asked the Carringtons he suddenly seemed to remember some engagement.”

“ Oh dear ! how tiresome of them ! I hope one of them at least will be at home : it is so awkward without a gentleman.”

“ We will ask Mr. Chesney, Grace.”

“ Mamma, be quiet ! ”

“ I am sure he would be ‘ so vewy happy,’ and delight in meeting that most beautiful ‘ Mrs. Cawwington.’ He would tell me he

‘had only once seen anyone to compare with her, and that was a Mrs. Wadnor, who was so beautiful she could not walk, I assure you, without a perfect cwowd of people following her.’ ”

Whilst Grace had gone off into another fit of laughter at her mother’s really admirable imitation, the door opened, and Everard Ashleigh came in.

“Why, Gracie, what a treat it is to see you laughing. Happiness is a wonderful beautifier, better than all the Rowlands’ Kalydor. How well you look!” he said, putting his hands on her shoulders, and looking in her face, from which all that unnatural sadness had departed, and on which the hue of health had taken the place of the old sickly pallor.

“I *am* quite well, too,” she answered; “and now, please tell me if you two bad boys mean to dine at home to-night, for

Mamma threatens me with Mr. Chesney if you do not?"

"*I shall dine at home: Walter says the mother gave him such short notice, that he cannot.*"

"I could not give him longer notice, my dear boy. I only saw the Carringtons yesterday, and asked them to come to-day. They go home to-morrow."

"Do they? Is not the fair bride going to pass the season in town?"

"Oh dear, no! they are quite turtle-doves, and wish to go and 'coo' among the woods, far removed from human ken," said Mrs. Ashleigh, smiling. "I had much ado to persuade them to come to-night."

"Happy people!" said Everard, with a slight sigh, walking to the window.

"They are happy people, really, and the handsomest couple I ever saw," said Grace: "she is exquisite, I think."

"Yes, she would have made a sensation had she stayed in London. I think Rupert Carrington has behaved so sensibly about his father. I tell Walter I think he showed great judgment in selecting him for his intimate friend: he's a fine fellow."

"Yes; he has behaved most sensibly. The truth is always best to be spoken, for it will come out sooner or later, try how we will to conceal it," answered Everard. "There they go again! Have you seen them before?" he said, suddenly.

"Who?" asked Grace, coming to him.

"The Ladies Murray in the Medlicott carriage. I met them just before I came in. They're in the drive. Lady Lilian and—and the youngest. They did not see me. Some young fellow was riding by the carriage, talking and laughing with them.

"Oh! how I should like to see them

again ; they were so nice. Lilian was an angel, I think. I have called the doves she gave me Lilian and Rupert. I always thought they would make such a nice couple."

"Yes, perhaps they would," answered Everard absently. "There they go ; they've just turned again. That fellow is still riding beside them."

"Some admirer, perhaps. I wonder she is not married ; this is her fourth season."

"Nonsense, Gracie, it's her first ; she's only sixteen."

"Lady Lilian, Everard ?"

"No, no ; Lady Gertrude."

"Oh, yes ! that merry little thing. I remember, she's quite a child : I should think she can't be out yet."

"A child ! how absurd you are, dear Grace. I tell you she was sixteen on the 10th of October."

"How *do* you know, Everard ?"

"Well, she told me so."

"She told you so! When? why?"

"When and why, my dear girl? you are as bad as the Inquisition. When—at a picnic I went to with them; why—because she wished me to guess her age, and the month she was born in."

"And did you?"

"Not exactly. I was nearly right as to the age; but I guessed the month was June, she is so bright—so sunny—so like the sweet June roses that make one glad to look at them."

"Everard! well, I'm sure! I never heard you speak like that of anyone before."

"Perhaps because I never saw anyone like her before, little sister," he said, in a lower voice.

Grace did not answer. With her grave brother she seldom jested; and there was that in his manner now, which made her

think that on this subject he would certainly not bear it.

Her mother called her at the moment, and the conversation was dropped ; but that night, when Dolly was chatting to her in her own room, before she left her for the night, as she always did, Dolly herself began a conversation about the Ladies Murray. She was a privileged person, and said what she liked—especially to Grace—and she gave it as her opinion that they were the nicest young ladies she had ever seen, and, in her opinion, her two young gentlemen had both lost their hearts there. But Grace laughed and said Everard had, she believed, really ; but Walter, she said, laughing, had no heart to lose. How little even our nearest and dearest know us !

“Don’t tell me,” answered Dolly, firing up for her favourite. “He’s got a heart of gold, and the difficulty is to find one

worth exchanging for it. But I'd ~~trust~~ him with those ladies, and hope to see it yet."

Poor faithful Dolly was quite happy now that she had all whom she loved under one dwelling, and highly approved of ~~the~~ change from that old dreary Priory to London.

Rupert and Madeleine had had the quietest, plainest wedding, from a house in town, which Madeleine took for the occasion, getting Mr. and Mrs. Donaldson and their daughter to come over from Ireland to act as father and bridesmaid, and that he might draw up the settlement and arrange all the affairs. They had started immediately for a trip to the lakes, by Madeleine's choice; and passing through London to go home, Rupert said he should so like to present his wife to the mother and sister of his greatest friend,

and they were mutually charmed with each other ; so that the invitation to dinner was given and accepted. Madeleine thought she had seldom seen a grander, handsomer woman than Mrs. Ashleigh, and could scarcely think it possible she was the mother of those two grown-up sons. Grace, too, she thought so gentle and ladylike, and of Walter she said she had such a pleasant recollection, that she could not resist—though against her first determination—dining with them. Great was her disappointment, and still more Rupert's, when they found Walter was not at home ; and Rupert laughingly left a threatening message for him. The evening passed most agreeably. Mrs. Ashleigh had a fine contralto voice, and sang several songs in an artistic style, well worth listening to ; Grace played ; and then Rupert insisted on Madeleine singing, which, without any affectation,

she consented to do ; but simply assured them that her singing was quite untrained, and that she knew little save the ballads of her native land. But, when once she began, they would not let her cease until she had sung as many as she could remember ; and Rupert's face was radiant as he listened to her, and heard the excited applause of her auditors. Then she insisted on Rupert's singing, and he declared he could not without music ; but Everard at once silenced this objection by producing several books of music, amongst which were many he knew—until the evening wore on so fast that Everard, glancing up to the clock on the mantel-piece, suddenly rose and left the room. He was just in time : the hall door opened, and Walter entered.

“ Our guests are not gone,” he said.

“ Indeed ; then I am in time, after all,”

Walter answered quietly ; and he walked up before his brother into the drawing-room.

“So here you are, you utterly bad lot,” said Rupert. “Allow me to present you to my wife,” he said, laughing.

It was a great effort to Walter to overcome his emotion and astonishment as the elegantly-attired beautiful woman rose, and held out her hand to him. Could that be little Kathleen ? his bright peasant beauty, against whose fascinations he had striven so hard to fight ? He could not speak for a moment : the words of congratulation died on his lips ; and, whether Rupert saw something was amiss or he was suddenly struck by the lateness of the hour, any way, he bid Madeleine get her cloak ; and, wishing them all good night, and expressing a hope that they would soon all come and visit them at the Priory, they took their leave.

A joyous welcome home Madeline and Rupert received ; and by no one were they more heartily welcomed than the good old Doctor. He so missed his friends at the Manor House, that he had the more looked forward to the arrival of the bride and bridegroom ; and Rupert had purchased his love by his conduct under the trying circumstances in which he had been placed, and the candid, pleasant, gracious manner to himself and others, which made him always so great a favourite.

“Now, doctor,” he said, as he went to see him off, walking down to the gate with him on the night of their arrival, “remember, the Priory is your home—altogether, if you *will* ; your second home, if you prefer to keep your present snug quarters.”

“My dear Mr. Carrington, you are too good ; but——” began the Doctor.

“Not a word of dissent,” said Rupert,

smiling, and placing his hand on the Doctor's shoulder. "You were my poor old father's best and kindest friend. Who should be so welcome beneath my roof, or find a home there, if he will? I know a little hut of one's very own is often preferable to sharing the grandest abode of another; therefore, if you prefer your pretty cottage to live in, so be it; but your knife and fork and your arm-chair are always at my table, understand that."

"You are very, very good, my dear young friend," said the Doctor, grasping Rupert's hand. "I have learnt to love my little cottage, and should grieve to leave it, I own; but I shall be often, often with you. Lately I have felt somewhat low-spirited at the thought that I must give the little place up, where I have been so peacefully happy; but dear, good Mistress Medlicott keeps saying she cannot spare me. Yet

why should I stay? what can I do for them now? The last young bird has taken her flight from the nest; the old bird is no longer wanted."

"Not to teach them to take wing, perhaps; but by his example to show them which way to fly. We all want you, and do not intend to let you go, I assure you. I mean having the finest library in the county, and I shall need a librarian. I want to learn Hebrew: you shall teach me; and, in short, you will be busier than ever. And now, good night. Let us see you early in the morning. By-the-bye, I forgot to say I bought those two cottages—yours and the next; so, if you really prefer living in yours, I shall be delighted to have such a careful and respectable tenant. Good night, Doctor."

He waited for no answer, but quarter-day from that time forth lost its terrors

for the Doctor. The cottage was his own—a present from Rupert Carrington.

“What a happy, peaceful life we pass, Rupert darling,” said Madeleine, as they stood together soon after their return home, watching the gardener execute some alterations in the garden Rupert had suggested. “Is it too peaceful, too monotonous? Does it weary you?”

“Weary me! Could I ever be weary near you?” he said, looking down into the large, loving eyes raised to his.

“Ah! that’s very pretty, and very sweet to hear; but can it ever be really so? Does a woman’s love ever make a man’s world? To me this existence is perfect. I have books, flowers, loving smiles of welcome—go where I will in the village—and you to come home to. What more on earth could I desire? But a man—it is different; and you must not, dear one,

think me so foolish as to expect you always to think this paradise. You will want to see again the old life you have left for me. Now, never wish and long for it in vain, Rupert love: men are naturally active, and like change and society. Believe me, I shall not grieve, or think you love me less, because you feel the necessity for the bustle and the excitement you were used to; but go freely where you will, knowing only that your home is here, with one counting the moments, it may be, till you return, but believing, with a faith she would rather lose her life than abandon, that wherever you are your heart is with her."

"My own dear Madeleine, I am sure of this; but, even before I was sure that you had run away with my heart, I thought I should like this sort of life. I love all rural occupations and sports; and if, with Fair Star to go across country, my dog and

my gun, my books, and, above all, my darling, I should be the most ungrateful hound in the world if I were not as happy as the day is long."

"Then all is well; and we will have friends to stay with us from town, to set them a good example of connubial felicity," said Madeleine. "Ah! another ring at the gate bell—the third this afternoon. We shall not weary of each other's society because we see no other."

"Mr. Prescott is in the drawing-room, sir," announced the servant.

"Mr. Prescott! He is come to say good-bye, I suppose. I hear he is going to Egypt."

"What a shame to bring you in, Mrs. Carrington, this lovely day!" said Prescott. "I am a messenger from my mother. I heard that this note was to be sent to the post, and so I volunteered to ride

over with it. I had no idea how to employ myself."

"You are going abroad, are you not?" asked Madeleine.

"Yes, going to try crocodiles for a change."

"I hope they won't return the compliment, and try you," said Rupert, laughing.

"I don't know that it would much signify," he said.

"Your mother might not agree with you," said Madeleine. "How does she like your taking such a journey?"

"I really have not inquired. She will scarcely have time to miss me—she goes to town next week for the rest of the season; and, in the whirl and bustle, she will not know I am gone until I am back again. She has an exceedingly slow dinner-party on Wednesday, as a farewell to me and to her county friends till our return; and

that note is, I believe, a request that you two will immolate yourselves on the altar of friendship."

"We shall be very happy, I am sure."

"No, you won't. Really, it will be the slowest thing out; but it will be very kind of you to come—it will be a mercy to all the others. I would go a pilgrimage to hear those Irish ballads. Come and sing them over again, that I may bear in my memory the echoes of them on the Nile."

"I will sing them to you with pleasure."

"Stay and dine," said Rupert, "and Madeleine will sing to you all the evening."

"I cannot, thank you—they expect me home. But I shall look forward to Wednesday."

"We will come. It is Thursday we dine at the Vicarage, Madeleine, is it not?"

"Yes; we are very dissipated: we shall fancy we are in London. I shall be so

glad when the people at the Manor House return, they are all so charming."

"Yes," he said, shortly.

"Have you heard from the Duke lately?"

"Yes; they come to town next week. The Duchess is to be presented on her marriage, and there is to be a large ball given by Mistress Medlicott for the bride and bridegroom."

"And shall you not stay for that?" asked Madeleine.

"No; I prefer crocodiles."

"A strange preference," said Madeleine, laughing; "not shared by many, I should imagine."

"Probably not; but my tastes have been always singular. And now I must, really, wish you good-bye, until Wednesday."

"What a nice nag you have there," said Rupert, patting the animal's neck as Prescott mounted.

"Yes ; he's not half bad, is he ?"

"Do you hunt ?"

"Yes—rather."

"We shall meet in the field, then, often ?"

"Yes, if I ever come back."

"Have you thought of marrying a Nubian, then, and establishing yourself out there?"

"I have no definite thoughts at all," he answered ; "but it is a long way to go, and one hardly likes to talk about coming back. *Au revoir ;*" and, giving the reins to his horse, lifting his hat to Madeleine at the window, he galloped off.

CHAPTER X.

THE gay season was over, and the Manor House was again tenanted by its old inhabitants, save one—Lilian had gone with the young Duchess to her new home. She was to stay with her a month, then Edith was to go, and the Duke and Duchess were to spend Christmas with them at Haseley Mere, taking Edith and Gertrude with them for the next London season, to the town house Philip was in treaty for; for dear Auntie said this must be her last attempt at London gaieties—it had wearied her too much. Lilian, who had never cared for it, greatly preferred remaining with Auntie in the country. So, as far as anything in this

world can be settled by ourselves, this arrangement was decided on, to everyone's satisfaction.

Nothing that wealth and good taste, dictated by love, could imagine for May's comfort had been neglected in her new home; and the young couple were as happy as they could be. May delighted in Lilian's gentle companionship. "She was always in the way, and never in the way," as her aunt said of her. She sympathized in the joys and sorrows of others; though, seemingly living in a world of her own, she did not share them. In her calm, sweet face there was a look which, but for its healthy hue, would have made those who loved her anxious about her—it seemed tinged with the light of another and a better world. But she was never sad or gloomy: entered readily, and with her sweet gracious manner, into every proposed amusement, and seemed never more

happy than when she was making others so. She was greatly admired in the neighbourhood, especially by the young Squire—a large, heavy, but thoroughly good-natured fellow, with a heart as large as his person, and a purse to match. The fair, gentle, ethereal-looking girl seemed to him like some denizen of another world; something to worship, to give his life to; and one day he ventured tremblingly to tell her this, and asked her to let him devote his to her. Kindly, even tenderly, she thanked him for the honour he did her, but said it could not be. He turned sadly away, bid her forgive him for disturbing the gentle current of her tranquil life, and only thought her more an angel, too pure for earthly love.

He told, in his honest simplicity, his tale to the Duke, who in his turn told his wife, and together they wondered why Lilian refused all offers. Was there some lover they

did not know of? May said for some long time they had fancied Lilian had a secret affection for someone, but they could never guess who.

“Who can he be, my darling?” said the Duke, greatly excited by this information; “do find out, if possible. What idiot can there be in the world who could be found not to appreciate that sweet Lilian? He must be married or dead: no living, free man could be insensible to her love.”

“But, my dear Philip, don’t walk the carpet in a hole,” said May, laughing, “and get in such an alarming state of excitement. The poor individual, whoever he may be, is doubtless not aware that Lilian cares about him.”

“No; but you mean that she loves someone who does not love her, and I can’t believe that possible.”

“Why, Philip, did you love her, then;

and, finding she would not have you, turned to me for consolation?" said May, laughing.

"No, you ridiculous little girl; you know quite well I loved you from the minute I saw you, and you soon let me see it was not thrown away (don't thump me); and I think Lilian must have fancied that the mysterious individual cared for her, or she never would have cared for him, and then she would have, of course, let him see it was mutual; and what could be the difficulty? I should feel inclined to do something desperate to any man who had behaved badly to her: but you know, May, I cannot imagine what fellow it is. Seymour Burlington was very attentive one season, I remember; and that young *attaché*—I forget his name."

"Oh! Philip, you might have a list a yard long of men who have paid her attentions; we shall never find out that way. I will ask her why she refused poor Dudley

Graham, and I may get at the truth. Is he very much cut up?"

"Oh! awfully, poor old fellow! How jolly it would have been if she could have fancied him, wouldn't it?"

"Yes; but he isn't fit for her, Philip. I don't know who is. See—here she comes. Doesn't she look lovely? I like her so in that white mulled muslin dress—it is so becoming."

"That what, Puss? do you serve muslin like claret?"

"Goose! No; it's the name of the material—a thick kind of muslin. It's such a pure, beautiful white, and Lilian looks like Una in it, or that beautiful statue of Purity. I should like a picture of her just so, Philip—look!"

She was coming up the long walk they called the rose walk—standard trees, laden now with their rich autumn blossoms, grew

on either side, and she had stopped to gather a crimson one, which she was holding in her hand, looking admiringly at it when May spoke. Her glossy hair in its rich plaits looked like burnished gold, with the light of the setting sun resting on it; and the plain, white, long dress, with no ornament or colour about her, but a large massive locket on a small chain round her throat, and the crimson blossom in her hand, made her, as May said, look like a picture. She needed but the kingly beast tamed at her side, "with eyes half shut for pleasure, courting the pressure of her gentle hand," to represent well the beautiful Una.

"Yes, she looks charming," said Philip. "I will try and make a sketch of her like that."

"Do, Philip. Get your paper now, and I will bring her in, shall I?"

"No; go to her and ask her to stand

there. I won't be long. You can talk to her about Dudley."

"Philip is going to make a sketch of you, Lilian; you are to please remain where you are."

"Is he? how very nice! I can take it home to dear Auntie."

"Is there no one else you would like to take your picture to, Lil?"

"No, dear," said Lilian, in a voice of astonishment; "what do you mean?"

"Why did you refuse poor Dudley Graham, eh?"

"Oh, May! who told you?"

"Philip, of course. The poor fellow came to him in despair; but still I do not think you were wrong; only, Lily darling, for whom is it, that everyone is sent away?"

"For myself, May. I will tell *you*, and you may tell Philip and the rest at home, if you will then let this matter rest for ever,

that I once saw someone whom I would have married—only that one in my life, May. He is married now, and I shall remain as I am—true to the only feeling of love for any man I ever had, quite happy and content to know no other.”

“And did he not love you, Lily?” said May, looking into her sister’s clear, sweet face with wondering eyes.

“No, May, that he did not, or he never would have been false. Thinking of him as I did, I used to dream that some day he would love me ; but you see he did not,” she said, smiling gently ; “and, as I feel sure there can never be another such as he, or as I dreamt he was, I would not put aside the memory of that dream or paint it out, as it were, with any other thought.”

“And you will live a lonely, unloved life for this shadow, Lilian?”

“Not lonely or unloved, May: a calm,

happy, contented life, with wider opportunities for usefulness than you married folks, who are wrapt up in one another. Never think of being sorry for me. I used to feel silly and romantic once, but I do not now. I am quite—quite happy, believe me.”

“One more question, Lilian, and I will worry you no more,” said May, who could not overcome her astonishment, as these to her were perfectly new feelings. “Did he do nothing to make you like him first?”

“Very little, dear. I slipped down two steps going into a garden: he sprang forward and asked if I were hurt. I cannot tell you why, May, but from that moment his face, his voice haunted me. I did not know his name, nor heard it till long afterwards.”

“And you know him still, now he is married, Lilian? And do I know him?”

“You said only one more question, May.”

“Ah! but do tell me this.”

"Well, yes ; I do know him, and so do you."

"It's Rupert Carrington !" said May, triumphantly.

"It *was* Rupert Carrington, May : he is married now, recollect," said Lilian, gravely ; "and a memory all apart, as it seems, from him, is all that remains of my girlish folly."

"How strange it seems. Shall I tell them who it was when I tell the girls ?"

"It is better not, perhaps ; but as you will."

"Stand still ! that's beautiful !" halloed Philip ; and, with the sweet, tranquil look upon the face her confession had called forth, Philip made his sketch of her, and called it "Resignation."

This revelation of Lilian's caused a long conversation between the young couple. Neither of them could understand Lilian's

feelings. They were both so constituted that they had a necessity, as it were, for love, and could not have existed without it. They would have instinctively turned for sympathy and consolation to some other loving heart, and wondered how Lilian could thus calmly look forward to a life without the love which made their happiness, and was so dear to them ; but they agreed that there was something in her higher and purer than in themselves, and that earthly love, perhaps, was not needed by her—that, with her thoughts occupied by nobler and diviner subjects than those of ordinary beings, she did not miss the love that to them was so precious. With this thought, they consoled themselves about her, and May flung her arms about her husband's neck, and, looking up into his face with that worshipping look in her eyes which he prized so, said :

“My Philip, what *would* become of May without your love?”

“My sweet wee wife, you will never know,” he answered.

They were wonderfully popular in their neighbourhood—the young Duke and Duchess. Her beauty and brightness, and his joyous, earnest manner—his interest in all matters either of business or pleasure—his ready willingness to serve anyone, high or low, rich or poor—and their mutual condescension and graciousness endeared them to all, and there were universal lamentations that they were going away for Christmas; but May explained that her aunt was getting too old to care for travelling, and she wished, if possible, to pass her Christmas with her as long as she lived, and spoke so warmly of all her aunt’s goodness, and told so many stories of her gentleness, and quoted so many of her wise sayings,

that those she talked to said they, too, must love Mistress Medlicott for having nurtured for them so sweet a Duchess. But though they did not pass their Christmas at Claverton, they did not forget the poor. Christmas dinners were given to all in the village who needed them, and such a Christmas tree exhibited in the large hall of the Castle as had never been seen before.

CHAPTER XI.

IN a small back room of a house in one of the dark London streets, a man sat busily at work. He looked pale and haggard, and his eager eyes were fixed on the small wheels and pieces of steel which he was adjusting, putting them together and taking them to pieces again, with a yearning, hungry sort of look upon his face—the eager desire to accomplish his will.

The door opened softly and a girl entered. He did not see her or notice her entrance. She waited a moment, and then said, gently:

“Won’t you have some dinner now, sir? Mother says it will be all spoilt.”

“No, no, child,” he said, petulantly; “I cannot eat till I’ve done this.”

The girl did not answer for a second, but there was a look of infinite pity in her tender, womanly face, as at length she said, turning sadly away :

“Oh dear ! I wish I could help you.”

“Thank you kindly, Lucy,” he said more gently, touched, as it seemed, by the genuine sympathy; “but you cannot. I would ask you if you could, for I know you would.”

“That I *would*, sir,” she said, earnestly. “Look here,” she continued, as if struck by a sudden thought; “let me bring up a small table and lay your dinner on that, and then we needn’t move all these little pieces, and you can eat a bit, and then turn and work a bit; do let me, sir?” she said, pleadingly.

“Well, well—as you will;” and he pushed

his hand wearily through his hair, and, sighing heavily, again applied himself to his work.

She brought the little table, laid the simple, frugal meal neatly ; but he took no note of her or it. Once again she came in, in her hand some roses she had put in a glass of water, and which she stood on the table near him. He roused at those, snatched them up, kissed them, looked at them with a softened, tenderer expression than that eager, harassed one, which pained his kind attendant to see for ever on his face—and satisfied that, at least, this was some little refreshment to him, she crept away, never expecting or feeling angered that no thanks followed her little offering, sufficiently rewarded by the knowledge that she had brought him something that pleased him.

In the evening of that same day Everard Ashleigh was told that a man by

the name of Greybrooke wanted to see him.

“Greybrooke ! Oh, yes !—all right. Show him in the library—I’ll come. Poor fellow ! I have not heard anything of him for an age ; I was going to day to look him up, but had not time.”

“Is he getting on ?” said Walter, looking up from his newspaper.

“Not very brilliantly, I fear—it is so difficult to make a start. He is full of wild ideas and chimeras ; but if he could really invent something useful, it would be such an encouragement to him, and I should induce him to patent it.”

“Where would his money come from ?”

“Ah ! that would have to be seen about,” said Everard, as he left the room.

“Exactly—and I know who would see about it, too,” said Walter ; “I never saw anything like that fellow Everard. He is

always thinking of, and doing something for, some one else ; he forgets his own identity utterly, I believe."

"Who are you talking about?" asked his mother.

"I believe I was thinking aloud, mother. It was Everard my laudations were addressed too."

"Ah, Walter! he deserves all praise that that can be given him; he is the most unselfish person in the world, I believe—save one," she said, smiling, "and that is my other son."

"My dear mother—thank you."

"Never was mother so blessed in her children," she said.

"Or children so blessed in their mother," said Walter, lifting his mother's beautiful hand to his lips, and kissing it.

"Dear, dear; what's all this love making about?" said a voice behind them.

“ Oh, Clarinda, is that you ? ”

“ Yes, it's me ; you were so engaged in tender speeches, you did not hear me knock.”

“ No, we did not, Auntie. Be seated,” said Walter, rising and giving her a chair.

“ I wanted to come and tell you something. I had a letter from Ireland to-day ; and, do you know, the child of that girl whom your uncle was in love with has married a man of the name of Cannington, and lives in Haseley Mere.”

“ Carrington, you mean,” said Walter, calmly.

“ Do you know about it, then ? ” she said, eagerly.

“ Yes ; I know that a Miss Fitzgerald, from Ireland, married my own intimate friend, Rupert Carrington, and that they have bought the Priory of us.”

"Then, why on earth didn't you tell me?"

"I did not know you were interested in the matter; nor, till a very short time ago, was I aware that Miss Fitzgerald had any connection with my Uncle's sad story."

"Well, it's strange how things have come about, is it not?"

"Yes; tell me all about it, Clarinda," said Mrs. Ashleigh. "Who have you heard from?"

"From Nora Dennison. I will read you the letter; but where's Everard?"

"He has some man with him on business."

"Oh! I want you all to come and dine with me to-morrow, to meet the son and daughter of an old friend of mine. Not a party—of course, I know you don't do anything in that line yet—only those two

young folks. The young lady is very pretty, Walter, and has a heap of money."

"You won't interest him, Clarinda, with that information ; he is invulnerable."

"Well, perhaps Everard may be more interested," said Miss Northcote, smiling.

"I don't know ; all my three children have taken vows of celibacy, I think."

"It's no wonder, with the specimen of matrimony they are most familiar with."

"Hush, Clarinda !" said Mrs. Ashleigh, gravely.

"Oh ! I'm not going to say anything, my dear—my opinion has been too often expressed to need repeating again. Walter, go and tell Everard I'm here. I want an answer about to-morrow, and I can't stay."

"Poor Ralph ! he's just gone," said Everard, as Walter entered, "in the seventh heaven. I think he really has hit upon something very useful and ingenious—a

great improvement in the gear of some machinery, which would be useless describing to you——”

“Utterly,” said Walter, shrugging his shoulders.

“So I shan’t try ; and I have written him a letter of introduction to a great machinist I know ; and if the thing is found to work I have promised him the money to patent it.”

“Just like you. I knew you would.”

“Well, you don’t object, do you?”

“Of course not ; why should I ? Has Ralph got over his—his infatuation ? Has science absorbed love ?”

“I am almost in hopes it has. He said—poor fellow !—‘I yearned to be great once, for the sake of someone else ; now that dream has ended, I would be great for my own sake.’”

“Rational party !” answered Walter ;
“there is no better mode of being unselfish

than taking care of yourself. You are then no trouble or annoyance to anyone else. Aunt Clarinda is in the drawing-room, and wants you. She has come to ask us to dine, to meet some fascinating party you are to fall in love with."

"Me! my dear fellow?"

"Well, we are eligible parties now the uncle is restored to public favour, and——"

"Ah, Walter! but I shall always feel there is a sort of cloud upon us, enough to prevent one having the face to ask a girl to link her fate to ours. We are still the sons of that man who bolted with the savings of some two or three hundred unfortunate people."

"Not actually proved, old man."

"No; but I have little doubt—and sometimes I wish we had not a farthing, and had to work for our living. The money seems to me as if it could have no blessing on it."

"My dear fellow, it was not only *that* money. He was so singularly fortunate. Everything he touched seemed to turn to gold. If he bought a picture, it turned out some wonderful thing he could sell for double what he gave for it. The land he bought had a mine in it. A new railroad came through some other property, and paid him thousands. No—poor creature!—the only good he ever did us was to leave us handsomely provided for."

"I would rather he left us a good name," said Everard.

"I don't know. It's easier to make and keep than money. Let it be our business to ennoble and make it honourable. But, I say—go upstairs, do, old fellow!"

"Ain't you coming?"

"I think I've done my duty," said Walter, smiling.

"Have you consented to go?"

"Yes; I must—I've no engagement. Go and see what the fair damsel is like. She may suit your taste, whatever that is—I have not found out yet."

"Like nothing I've made acquaintance with in London, Walter. I'm a strange being, you know."

"Is it like anything you've seen in the country, eh, old man?" said Walter, as Everard was leaving the room.

"Ah! I don't know," he said, shutting the door quickly after him.

"Poor old man!" said Walter to himself; "I believe she bit him. She's a nice little thing. I suppose I must answer Rupert now. How I wish he would *not* ask me down there. She's a perfect lady, and a sweet hostess. What a fool I was!" With this comfortable reflection, concluded by the slight raise of his eyebrows, Walter began his letter.

When it reached its destination, Rupert flung it across the table, and said :

“ I cannot think how it is that fellow Pop never *will* come and see us. I want to talk to him about a hundred things.”

A slight flush tinted Madeleine’s face, but she answered quietly :

“ Go up to him, love, if you will.”

“ Oh, no ! it’s not so important as that, but I hoped he would pass most of his Sundays here. I suppose the place has unpleasant associations ; but it is so altered one would hardly know it now.”

“ Yes ; it does not look sombre or ghostly now.”

“ No ; but you know when he *was* down here, he seemed strange and silent, and had an odd, constrained manner I could not make out.”

Madeleine could, for “ quickly comes such knowledge.” She had always known—she

could not help knowing—that he had admired her, and that his frequent visits to the farm were not only to see old Broderip ; but until after her marriage she did not dream that the feeling was serious. One glance at the white face, the altered voice, when they met, was enough, and it had cast the first and only shadow on her happiness. He was so good : she was so grieved to be the cause of the smallest unhappiness to him, and again and again she thought of her own conduct, and wondered if any way she had been to blame ; but she could not feel she had, and only hoped that the good sense she knew he possessed would help him to forget her—regard her only as his friend's wife, and find his happiness in some other love, and so she did not answer her husband's speech, but spoke of something else, and the subject was dropped for the time.

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER Christmas had passed and gone, and the bright London season had returned, bringing wealth and fashion to throng its streets, its theatres, and operas ; to fill the Park with carriages, and the Ride with equestrians ; to make whitebait parties at Greenwich, water-parties at Richmond, dinners at the Star and Garter, at one of which a very merry group are assembled.

It was a glorious day, and the Duke of Claverton had suddenly exclaimed, as they finished breakfast :

“What do you say, girls, to a dinner at Richmond, and a stroll in that exquisite park ?”

The suggestion was warmly seconded by the girls, Edith and Gertrude, who were staying with them, as had been arranged, leaving dear Auntie to her quiet country home, with the companionship of Lilian and Ma'mselle. Greatly were the girls enjoying their visit, for nothing could exceed the kindness of Philip, and his unwearying exertions to amuse them.

For the last few days he had been very mysterious—flying to the window at every knock, excited at the arrival of the postman, very particular as to the girls' dresses, and how they looked, and altogether rousing May's curiosity, who continually asked what was the matter, but could obtain no answer but "Never mind," "I don't know," "You'll see."

This bright morning he had had several letters—one forwarded from Claverton, which, having read through twice with a

smile on his face, he had put it in his pocket, and his restlessness had increased, and his proposal to go to Richmond seemed a sort of safety-valve for the excitement which evidently possessed him, and the reason for which he evidently was longing to impart to someone else.

At length he called May back as she was leaving the room, and said he wanted to speak to her very particularly, and eagerly imparted to her the cause of his excitement, which information had the same effect on her, and she quite agreed with him that the sooner they got that day over the better; and then May rushed upstairs, and expended her excitement on a small thing enveloped in white cambric and pink flannel, who, whenever it was seen by the Duke, sent him into fits of laughter, which half offended May; but he assured her he could not help it: it was so ridiculous to think that that little,

soft, tiny, blue-eyed thing was his son. And when she told him everybody said it was a splendid boy, and he ought to be very proud of him, he said, so he was, "awfully," but he must laugh all the same. Between the last violet and the first rose this treasure had arrived at Claverton, and there was some doubt as to the propriety of May passing the season in town, but she could not bear to disappoint the girls, and promised the utmost care of herself; and so, under sundry restrictions—petted to such an extent by Philip, that she said sometimes she thought she should never care to be strong again, that he might still watch her so tenderly—she came to town with that wonderful Sydney Philip, Marquis of Erlingham, who had so interfered with the prospects of his Uncle Harold, and yet who had with the greatest magnanimity stood sponsor to him, and presented him with a gold cup,

the Duke himself standing proxy for his friend Prescott, whom he had written to, and said he must be his boy's godfather, whether he liked it or no. And having kissed this great, small personage within an inch of his little life, May went dancing back into the drawing-room, where the girls were, and kissed them violently, making them wonder at this sudden burst of affection; but she told them she could not account for it, only she felt so well and bright, and she liked the thought of going to Richmond so much.

Lord Harold came in during the morning, and was, of course, asked to join them for Richmond; and about an hour before they started the Duke said he had met Everard Ashleigh, and asked him and his brother and sister to go to Richmond too.

"I like those people awfully, May," he said. "I mean quite to affect them. You've

got their names down for our dance, have you not?"

"Oh, yes! of course. I think that Walter charming; and he dances exquisitely."

"I say—come, none of that, your Grace, or I shall feel inclined to scratch their names out again."

"Yes; I dare say," said May, smiling. "I make you dreadfully jealous, don't I?"

"Well, really, there is one fellow I am frightfully jealous of, without joking."

"Philip, nonsense!" said May, looking somewhat anxiously in his face. "Who do you mean?"

"The Marquis of Erlingham."

A shower of missiles were immediately darted at him by the three ladies, and he escaped with a slight blow on the head from a ball of worsted, and with an antimacassar hanging to the button of his coat.

The dinner at Richmond was a great success. The weather was beautiful, and the drive home by moonlight, too, charming. All expressed themselves delighted with the day, save one.

"What's the matter, Everard?" asked Grace, as he threw himself back in a chair with a great sigh; "are you tired?"

"No."

"Hasn't the day been lovely? Oh! I don't know when I have enjoyed anything so much."

"Yes; the weather has been beautiful."

"And the company charming."

"Yes, with the exception of that puppy I should like to kick."

"Everard, who do you mean?" said Grace, astonished beyond measure at her quiet brother's excitement.

"Lord Harold Murray, I mean. Because he has a handle to his name, I suppose he

thinks he can make himself as disagreeable and take as many liberties as he chooses."

"Come, come, Everard," said Walter, "don't be demonstrative. What's he done to you?"

"Oh! nothing to *me*; but he's got a sort of put-you-down manner I don't like. I think he wasn't licked enough at Eton. I wish he'd been my fag."

"I can't say I saw anything to dislike in him. Altogether, it's been one of the pleasantest parties I have ever been at. Lady Edith is marvellously improved; she used to be fearfully haughty, but she was affability itself to-day, and the sweet Duchess charming and beautiful as ever."

"I like Lady Gertrude," said Grace, "so very much now, and so does Lord Harold, I can see. I believe that will be a match, don't you, Walter?"

"No; let's go to bed."

The Duchess and her husband talked together long after the girls had gone to bed, making arrangements for the morrow.

“All we must be careful of is that *both* of us are not out,” said the Duke, “at the same time, and that we are ‘at home’ all day to-morrow.”

“I have told Capel that, and Stapely knows him; so if he catches sight of him, he will be sure to admit him.”

“That is right; and now, my darling, not another word. I shall have such a white face in the morning. Ring for Demman.”

“Girls,” said May at breakfast next morning, “I am going to send you into the Park this morning with baby, for a constitutional. There is a dance to-night at Lady Morryson’s, you know, and you must have a quiet afternoon; and a nice walk this lovely morning will give you beautiful colours, and make you fit for con-

quest. By-the-bye, Gertrude, what is to be done with poor Harold ? ”

“ What is to be done with him ! what do you mean ? ” said Gertrude, laughing a little conscious laugh.

“ Why, it’s a sad case, evidently. I think he is beginning to think whether his income can keep Lady Gertrude Murray in such a style as she would like.”

“ Nonsense, May ! ”

“ Oh, yes ! of course everyone says nonsense under the circumstances, though they know all the time it’s true. But, seriously, Gertrude, will he do ? Would you have him if he asked you ? because, if not, Philip had better give the poor boy a hint.”

“ She is too young, May,” said Edith, earnestly, as Gertrude made no answer ; “ do not urge her. She will say, perhaps, what she does not mean, and wreck her happiness for life.”

"But surely, Edith, the child knows whether she likes Harold well enough to accept him when she is old enough. I knew the minute I saw Philip that I should never like anyone else, and I never did."

"But people are different, May ; they cannot all decide at once if they like a person. With some dispositions it requires *time* before they can discover their feelings."

"Yes," said May, "so I have heard. It seems strange to me ; but surely, Gertrude, you can tell by this time if you like Harold. You have seen him incessantly since my marriage, and knew him when he was a boy."

"Well, then, if you must know, I cannot say I do, May ; at least, I don't dislike him, but I should be awfully sorry to have to pass the rest of my life with him. He's got nothing to say."

“Nothing to say ! why, he chatters incessantly,” said May, laughing.

“Chatters ! yes, that’s the word. Empty nonsense you cannot remember when he’s gone, or ever care to hear him repeat again.”

“Gertrude likes people who can tell her about flowers and stars, and speaks little—in a soft, sweet voice, and smiles tender smiles when *she* chatters, eh, Gertrude ?”

“Edith, you are silly—unkind,” said poor Gertrude, with a very red face.

“No, no, dear,” said Edith, rising and coming to her — May had run laughing from the room — “not unkind. I want *you* to be sure, before you speak the word, which makes the happiness or misery of a life ; to let no pride, no whim, make you utter words that you will for ever regret.”

“Edith, dear, I don’t want to be asked

any questions which concern my happiness yet ; I am very contented as I am, and would much rather be let alone."

"Yes, Gertrude ; but there will, perhaps, come a time when you will think it is very sweet, to know that in someone's eyes, there is no one on earth like you, that even the failings others condemn, as belonging to you, are precious to him ; and may there *never* come a time when you will bitterly regret you have sent such an one from you with cold, false words of pride and folly. Oh ! Gertrude, let us go out and walk—get into the air—do something !" and pressing her white hands to her head, she hurried out of the room.

They took their walk as May bid them ; and after luncheon, Edith went to her own room and threw herself on her bed in a weary, listless way that had grown a habit with her, but that grieved Gertrude to

see. Edith asked to be alone—she liked it better, and so Gertrude went to the nursery to baby. She was very proud of her first nephew, and was playing with him and talking to him when the door opened, and May, with a flushed face and sparkling eyes, said:

“Is Edith here?”

“No, she is in her room; do you want her?”

“Yes; go to her, Gertrude, and tell her—no, I’ll go myself; you stay here till I call you.” And leaving Gertrude wondering, May left the room.

In the small drawing-room which May called her boudoir, and to which only intimate friends were shown, sat the Duke and a young man whom, with his bronzed face and long silky beard, it would be difficult to recognize as Sydney Prescott. They were talking earnestly—the Duke in his excited,

eager tones, and Prescott speaking in slow and sadder ones.

"Syd, you are too aggravating, uncharitable, unforgiving, unchristian-like, un—everything. I tell you, she is as sorry as she can be."

"Philip, I cannot ask a woman twice to be my wife. I was too hasty, perhaps, but I believe that real love comes at once, needs 'no time to consider,' and that nonsense: it is a sudden inspiration. If she had cared for me she would have said so then."

"But, Syd, do you mean to say that we never *grow* to like people—that, though we don't take to them particularly at first, after a time, when we find how good they are and that they love us, we may not learn to love them too?"

"Was that how you loved your May? No, no, Philip, I don't want to deny that constant intercourse with a good and pleasant

person might lead to a sort of affection which might end in matrimony, as I may some day marry a fat, buxom landlady, who cooks my mutton chop well, and looks after my shirt buttons—but that is not it. What I mean is over for me.”

“That’s all stuff, Syd ; why, the very first day you saw the girls you liked Gertrude best.”

“Stay ! I told you she was worth the whole lot.”

“Yes, you did,” eagerly interrupted the Duke.

“I know. I do think that altogether she has the finest and most original character of the four ; but it only proves my case. Love and admiration are quite distinct, though—sometimes one is parent of the other. In the majority of cases the woman you love is very far removed from the woman you admire.”

“ Well, then, you mean to say,” said the Duke impatiently, “ that this boasted love is as quickly ended as it is suddenly born—a cold word, a foolish mistake, has power to cast it away for ever ? ”

“ Not so,” said Prescott, and there was a sad ring in his voice as he spoke ; “ *nothing* can cast it away ; but proffered once and rejected, it is buried out of sight, as we bury our dead—but in like manner forgotten never. Enough of this,” he said, starting up ; “ it makes a fool of me. I thought I had scorched it out of me in Egypt—looked at black and brown faces and raven hair, till I had forgotten the meshes of gold I was tangled in ; but no matter—let us talk of something else. How’s my godson ? I didn’t know what to bring him. I thought the Duchess would object to a turban or a hookah, as a little beyond his years—a mummy would not have been much use either, would it ? ”

"Oh ! I don't know ; yes—no. What a nuisance this is !" said the poor, perplexed Duke ; " you know, Syd, she's here."

" She ! who ?"

" Edith."

" Then good-bye," he said, snatching up his hat ; but as he spoke the door opened, and she entered with May, poor May, whose heart beat as fast as Edith's, faster now, for at the first glance of the face, the cold, grave face, white, even through the bronze of the eastern clime, her heart almost ceased to beat ; and with all her effort to be calm and unconcerned as she had meant to be, she was compelled to sink into the first seat near her.

May overpowered him with congratulations as to his safe return ; asked him twenty questions without waiting for an answer ; talked of her baby, of every imaginable subject, receiving an occasional monosyllabic

reply. And the Duke stood looking out of the window, and Edith sat still, saying never a word, but trying indefatigably to undo a knot in her watch-chain; but presently Prescott turned to her, when May would give him a chance, and said, very slowly, as though it was an effort to keep his voice steady :

“ My kind old friend, Mistress Medlicott, is well, I hope, Lady Edith ? ”

“ Quite well, thank you,” she answered.

“ And your sisters ? ”

“ Both quite well. Gertrude is here with me ; we are doing the season, going through that labour we call pleasure,” she said, recovering her composure with that marvellous power over herself so remarkable in her.

“ Syd, you’ll dine here,” said the Duke, “ of course ? The girls are going to a dance. I don’t care about it—I’ll stay at home with you.”

"Thank you—no, I shall go home ; the old lady has an odd desire to see me, strange taste peculiar to mothers."

"What ! go down to Oatlands to-night ?"

"Yes—by the six train I'm off."

"Oh ! but you must see Gertrude, Mr. Prescott," said May, hastily. "You will be surprised how she's grown ; and your godson—are you going to be so unnatural as to go without seeing him ? Ring, Edith dear. I insist on your waiting !"

"Allow me," said Prescott, stepping forward to ring the bell. She looked up at him as he approached her to ring the bell, but he never turned his eyes to her ; and moving away, went to the window where the Duke still stood.

"Desire Copley to bring baby, and ask Lady Gertrude if she will come down," said the Duchess, when the servant answered the summons.

They came together, she and baby—the latter, of course, uttering a piteous cry of dismay at the brown, bearded figure that ventured to approach him, and he was immediately conveyed away; but Gertrude was like a sunbeam amongst the gloom which seemed to hang over them. She made him talk; she drew him out to tell of his travels; she asked him what he thought of the Nubian women, of the desert, of the crocodiles, in her bright fresh voice, with her glad, cloudless eyes fixed on his face, eagerly awaiting his replies—making such strange original remarks, that they could not help laughing, all of them. And Edith could have blessed her, for she had brought back to his face the old merry gleam which seemed to have gone for ever. At length he said he must go; and Philip offered to walk with him.

“And shall we not see you again this

season ? are you not coming back to town ?” asked May.

“No ; I shall be something new at home, and be made so much of, that I shall stay till the freshness is rubbed off a bit. I hope my godson will treat me with more respect when I see him again. Good-bye, Duchess ; good-bye, Lady Gertrude. I shall have some extraordinary creatures to show you when you come back to the Manor House.”

“Thank you ; I shall like that. We shall be home in about three weeks’ time, I think.”

Once more was heard “Good-bye, Lady Edith ;” but she herself could not as before answer him lightly. The white lips moved, but there came no sound. Her fingers scarcely touched his extended hand ; but he, in his turn, spoke some light words about wishing her a pleasant party, and he was gone. And the things in the room seemed all in

a mist, and the voices of Gertrude and May afar off, as with unsteady step she rose and went away to the refuge of her own room, where none could witness the bitter tears she could no longer repress, though she despised herself for shedding them.

CHAPTER XIII.

LILIAN and Mistress Medlicott had been very happy in their quiet way. Their principal visitors had been Rupert and Madeleine—with both of whom Mistress Medlicott was delighted—and their beautiful little girl, who, with large wondrous eyes like its mother, was her chief pet and plaything. In short, the little lady bid fair to be utterly spoilt, for she ruled the old folks at the farm like a very tyrant; and as to Jane Broderip, she was her perfect slave. Her father seemed to consider there was only one other being in the world, and that was her mother; and that mother thought every silken hair on that little head was more precious than threads of gold, and would

kneel beside the little cot in which her treasure lay, watching it with an almost painful love. To Dr. Stillwell, too, this child was something more precious than he could ever have imagined anything on earth would ever be. What it was that so charmed him he knew not. Gertrude used to tell him it was because she was its godmother—which she was, at her own request; but, any way, he would watch her asleep, nurse her awake, wait on her like a queen, patiently pick up the toys which she ruthlessly scattered on the ground, and, with an imperious point of her finger, command to be restored to her—lifting her rosebud of a mouth for a kiss afterwards, for which he would have gone through any fatigue. Lilian, who, gentle and kind to everybody, was not an enthusiast about babies, owned the fascination of this small child.

One day, after the girls had returned to the Manor House, Gertrude had gone to spend the day at the Priory, and play with her godchild, when, in the middle of a great game of romps on the floor, the door opened, and Prescott entered. Gertrude sprang up, laughing and apologizing.

“I never heard you ring.”

“Rupert was in the garden, Lady Gertrude, and I walked in with him. What a beautiful child that is !”

“Isn’t she lovely ?—the image of her mother !”

“Yes, exactly like her.”

“I stopped to take the letters ; old Bates has been to Meresborough and got the second post,” said Rupert, coming in. “And what do you think ? Everard and Walter are coming down till Monday : I am so glad.”

“Darling baby, shall Gertrude take her to mamma ?” said her little Ladyship,

burying her face among baby's curls; and away she went, leaving the gentlemen together.

By the dinner train, as Rupert called it, his friends arrived; and, as he had persuaded Prescott to stay, they had a most pleasant evening, and Gertrude thought how very soon she had been sent for. Lilian was growing a little anxious about Auntie: she seemed very well, but she slept so much—fell asleep continually in her chair — making Lilian watch her anxiously, and listen to her gentle breathing, so gentle, it needed her to listen to be sure she breathed at all; but ever on her lips, during those sleeps, was a sweet, happy smile. One evening, after one of these slumbers, she woke and called, “Bertie!”

Lilian went to her directly.

“Did you call me, dear?” she asked.

“Yes—no, love, no; but I want to talk

to you. I don't think Edith is quite happy ; and Bertie—I mean Sydney—is so altered. What is it, Lilian ? Is there anything wrong ? ”

“ I fear, dear Auntie,” said Lilian, “ Edith foolishly refused him, and she is sorry now.”

“ That must be put to rights,” she said ; “ send her to me.”

A long, long interview they had, and Gertrude wondered why Edith was so quiet all day, and yet not so sad as she had seemed lately. In the evening a letter went to the post from Mistress Medlicott to S. Prescott, Esq., requesting to see him, if he could spare her a few minutes any afternoon most convenient to him.

At three o'clock the next day he was at the Manor House. Mistress Medlicott was alone. She had asked the girls to take the carriage and make some calls, at a

distance too far for her ; and taking her accustomed chair in the drawing-room, she desired that no one should be admitted, unless it was Mr. Prescott : she would see him. The old housekeeper, who for twenty years had lived with her, had been chatting with her, as, when her Mistress was alone, she often did, and a smile was still on her face as Prescott entered. She extended both hands to him, and, begging him to be seated, said :

“ Good boy to come. I have just been told I am to have a wedding in my family, I did not send for you about that, though. They say one wedding makes many. I expected that, when May set the example, I should soon have lost all my girls ; but the first to follow is my little scullery maid, very much to poor Mrs. Sebright’s distress.”

.. “ Distress ! is not the match a desirable

one?" said Prescott, with a sort of sigh of relief, as though he was better satisfied to hear it was *only* the scullery maid.

"Well," said Mistress Medlicott, "as desirable as she could expect, I suppose; but Mrs. Sebright says she is too young, and such a favourable-looking young woman, to use her own phrase, that she might have done better than marry a farm-labourer. But I will not waste your time with such uninteresting domestic details: it is on another subject I would speak with you. I am very old, and 'the grasshopper has become a burden'; and the warning that I must give up the trust so long confided to me, has been given me. I would have been glad, had it so pleased God, to have left my dear girls all with protectors; but this is, I know, not to be, for one has chosen her life should pass, like mine—alone. But I have been watching another

of my children, and I fear," she said, laying her hand on Prescott's, "that she has made a silly mistake which may blight her young life and make it bitter. To pass through life with a tender memory, a shadow of a great happiness that might have been, has a chastening, softening influence on us; but to feel, through our own folly—our own pride and self-will—we have thrown away the happiness placed in our reach, must render life one long regret—one bitter penance."

Prescott's head dropped lower and lower as she spoke, but he made no reply, though she waited a second, as if expecting it.

"I am over eighty years old, and for over fifty years of that long life I have kept a secret which I will now tell you, because it will excuse my speaking to you as I am about to do. Sydney, I have passed this long life alone—for your uncle's

sake. He loved me—would have made me his wife—and I would not have him ; but it was because I loved him so well, I would not. Not in anger, not in pride, I sent him from me ; and so I have gone on my way, with the bright hope, drawing so near its fulfilment now,” she said, raising her eyes, and clasping her fair delicate hands tightly together, “to meet him, and tell him how I loved him, even whilst I grieved him. Sydney, do not let child of mine sadden the life of anyone belonging to him. ‘It is sweet to murmur one word of the Eternal’s language, on earth it is called forgiveness.’ You will stay here to dinner,” she said, rising slowly from her chair. “May you be guided aright in this matter by higher guidance than mine, my—son, as you seem to me ;” and bending down, she pressed her lips on the head bowed in his hands now, and quietly left him to himself.

Edith looked very beautiful when she entered the room, dressed for dinner, that evening. She cared very little for dress, and seldom troubled herself about it, putting on what Briggs laid out for her, without question ; but this night she had been much more particular, and though the dress was quite simple, it was most elegant and very becoming, and there was a gentle, soft light in her eyes, that gave to her face the expression it needed to make her, perhaps, the handsomest of the four sisters. Dr. Stillwell was again requested to come to dinner, and remove any awkwardness or embarrassment, as he had once done so ably before ; and under his auspices and Gertrude's it passed off very well.

It was a very hot night, and after dinner Gertrude and Lilian went out on the lawn to watch the falling stars, and wish as they fell ; and, with their arms round each

others' waist, wandered about, laughing and singing (Lilian was always bright and cheerful now); and Dr. Stillwell challenged Mistress Medlicott to a game at cribbage, at Lilian's suggestion — she thought it better for her than sleeping. Edith sat by the open window, leaning her head against it; and, after a moment or two, without looking up, she knew that Prescott stood beside her.

“What a lovely evening!” he said, at length.

“Yes; very warm, though. I think we shall have a storm.”

“Yes, it may come up—it has been lightning for some time. The Doctor and I have been watching it.”

“Have you?”

Another pause, and then he said:

“Are you frightened at storms?”

“Not in the least. Gertrude is.”

"That was a bright flash. Ah! it has driven her in."

"Please let us pass, Mr. Prescott," she said; "it's lightning. I can't stop there any longer."

"Only summer lightning, Lady Gertrude."

"But Lilian thinks there will be a storm by-and-bye. Oh! I shan't go to bed. Auntie, take care of me!" and she ran to her aunt and, sitting down on the ground, laid her head in her lap.

Lilian went to the piano, and Edith and Prescott stayed still at the window. Presently he said:

"If you are not afraid of the lightning, will you come out?"

"Yes," she said, very softly.

"Will you have a shawl over you?"

"Oh, no! it's so warm;" and she stepped out.

A white cashmere shawl of Mistress Medlicott's lay on a chair near. He snatched it up and followed her, and, putting it gently round her, said :

"You had better. An English climate does not permit liberties. Ah ! there is another flash. If this goes on, Firefly will put me in a ditch—she has not your philosophy, and objects to lightning."

"You must not go, if the storm comes on," she said, quickly.

"Why not ?"

"You say your horse will be frightened, and throw you, perhaps."

"And would that signify ?"

"Yes, if it hurt you."

"If it killed me, what then ? there would be one less in the world, that's all, and all the disappointments—'the weary, unsatisfied longings,' as Longfellow, isn't it ? says—would all be over. Who would care

or miss me, save the poor old folks? they might a little. How suddenly it has clouded over! The storm is really coming; there is a growl of distant thunder. You had better come in—don't sit down; the lightning is more continuous. Come in—they will be anxious about you. *Your* life is precious—come!”

But she moved not, nor spoke. Clouds were veiling the moon; but in the fitful light, as he bent down to her, he could see that her cheeks were wet with tears, and a little low sob of anguish broke from her full heart. Oh, how hard it was! She, who had thought May so silly, so weak, was breaking her own heart now for this man whom, a year ago, in her pride, she had refused.

He waited a second. Were those tears for him? Was it pity, or love? Surely Mistress Medlicott would not have spoken

as she did, unless she was sure there was no risk in once more asking for her love; but it was hard for him, too.

“Won’t you come in?” again he said.
“What is it? Are you ill?”

Quicker, faster came the sobs, the more she tried to stay them. She held her hands upon her throat, pressed them on her chest; but in vain. Oh, if he would only say once more, “Edith, I love you!” but he only stood there watching her painful efforts to regain composure. At length she started up, and flew past him into the house by the entrance that led to the servants’ rooms, and he walked on back into the drawing-room.

The rain began heavily to fall, and louder grew the thunder, sharper the lightning.

“Where’s Edith? Oh, Mr. Prescott! I am so frightened,” said Gertrude.

“Lady Edith is gone in. The storm is really coming, is it not?” and he took up a book and idly turned the leaves over, but in their pages he only saw one tearful face. Mistress Medlicott looked up anxiously at him, but he did not meet her eyes, only kept watching the door. She did not come back. He grew restless, anxious—perhaps she had fainted; he would tell Lilian. He rose and went to the piano, and bending down to her said:

“I do not think Lady Edith is well. Will you go to her?”

“Oh, yes!” She rose at once, and called Gertrude to play. “You will forget the storm if you amuse yourself, you little goose,” she said; “I shall be back in a minute, and I will play a duet with you.”

“You must come and stand close beside me, Mr. Prescott, then,” said Gertrude, “and be quite prepared for a hideous shriek if a

flash comes across my music, when I'm playing."

He gave some reply, he scarcely knew what, and stood by her watching her fingers moving, but perfectly unaware whether she was playing "The Soldiers' Chorus" or the "Dead March in Saul."

Presently the door opened, and the sisters came in together. Mistress Medicott looked up from her cards.

"Why, Edith dear, what is it? not well?"

"I have a headache, Auntie," she said, kneeling down by her Auntie's chair and resting her head on her shoulder.

"Poor little lady!" she said, tenderly smoothing the golden hair; "storms often give us headaches."

"Your horse is round, sir," said the servant, entering the room and coming to where Prescott stood watching Edith. "Your

man said you ordered him to come early, sir, and he says the mare is so frightened and fidgetty she won't stand."

"Hush! All right—I'll come." He walked up to Mistress Medlicott, and said he must go—it grew late.

"But, my dear boy, not through this storm; it will be over soon. Wait a little."

"No, I think I'd better go. Firefly rather objects to the storm."

"Better wait, sir—better wait," said the Doctor.

They had all risen, and Edith had moved towards the door.

"Oh no, no! good-night; naught's never in danger," he said, with an attempt at a laugh; and as he came towards Edith, and was going to say good-night, she gasped forth:

"Do not go through this."

"Why not?" again he said, and hurried

on ; but she followed him, and, as a tremendous flash lighted all the park, she saw through the glass door the horse rear and plunge ; and forgetting all but her terror for the safety of him she now knew she loved better than life—loving him the more for the very conduct that made her suffer—honouring the pride that had kept him silent—she seized his arm and said, with all the passionate earnestness, the agony of love, she then felt for him :

“ Sydney, for *my* sake, do *not* go.”

Then he turned and caught her in his arms, gazed for an instant speechless in the white, tearful face, and almost sobbed out : “ Then you *do* love me ? ”

She did not know herself what she answered, but he was satisfied ; and when a second peal of thunder and flash of lightning brought all out of the room once more to see if they could stop him from going,

neither he nor Edith were to be seen. He had drawn her into the library, and coming out when he heard their voices, with a bright excited face he whispered a few words to Mistress Medlicott, and leading her into the room closed the door, to Gertrude's immense astonishment and indignation ; but Lilian only smiled and bade her come back into the drawing-room, and asked the Doctor to keep the curious child quiet if he could, but he protested that was impossible ; and then she said she would be good and quiet if he would teach her cribbage ; but before the hand was dealt her effort at patience was rewarded and her curiosity gratified, for Edith came in on Prescott's arm, looking so brightly, tremblingly happy, and dear little Auntie said : " Gertrude, here is another brother ! "

With that last peal the storm ended ; the moon was sailing again in the heavens,

shedding its soft radiance on the two happy lovers. Firefly went back to the stable, and the groom went home to Oatlands with a message that Mr. Prescott would not return till the morning.

CHAPTER XIV.

ANOTHER year has come and gone, since the moon shone on the gardens of the Manor House, and seemed to shed its blessing on the heads of the two, whose lives had nearly "run apart," and there were only two out of the four girls left beneath its roof. Still weaker had grown the mistress of the house, and yet, as it seemed, still happier. Lilian saw that the end was coming, and yet she felt it ungrateful to grieve, so great seemed the peace and joy which shone in the dear face—so great the yearning to seek the rest she had so well earned.

In the large hall the summer sun, coming aslant through its painted windows, fell on

a group of children, a young, bright, joyous girl, and an old dog, on whose back was riding a small white kitten, the great grandchild of one which some years before had taken a ride on poor Nep's back. The same merry laughter rang through the hall, but down the stairs came not the gentle lady with her ebony stick—she was on the sofa in her own room, from which she never moved now but to her bed. Gertrude had asked a few children to tea, and was devoting herself entirely to their amusement.

Blanche Carrington was the idol of the whole party. Her beauty, her grace, and fascination made itself felt even by children, and her pretty consciousness of her own power was amusing to see.

Gertrude was a delightful playfellow. The innocent gaiety of her own nature, aided by her health and strength, enabled

her to play with all the untiring energy of a child. She could toss the little sturdy things about, and run races with them, carrying the smallest on her back, sing to them, dance with them, tell stories to them, eat imaginary dinners and drink imaginary teas ; in short, as all voted, never was there such a playmate as Lady Gertrude.

Lilian's time was almost entirely devoted to Mistress Medlicott. The patient waiting and the watching, the gradual loosening of earthly ties, and the preparation, as it were, of the spirit for its flight to a higher existence, was well suited to the disposition of the gentle girl : and, though many times, when she saw the slow but sure signs of the parting between her and her more than mother, the sweet eyes would fill with tears, still the feeling that the grief was so entirely selfish, helped her to overcome it. Gertrude,

to whom she often talked of the inevitable separation that was pending, could less calmly bear to view it, but she daily now endeavoured to realize it, to look the trouble in the face; and feeling that it must be borne, she made up her mind to do so bravely, and give as little trouble as possible to Lilian.

But May was far less easily reconciled. When Lilian's letter came, saying that she thought it better they should come to the Manor House as soon as convenient, for she feared the days of her who had so loved and cared for them were few, her grief was passionate, and poor Philip was in despair. What could he say? how was he to console her? He would take her at once to Haseley Mere; Lilian's gentle influence was best. She should go at once, he said, if she would only cease that bitter crying that made his heart ache to see.

Edith grew very white when she read

the letter that summoned them, and handing it to her husband, said calmly :

“ Let us go at once, Syd.”

And so, on the following day after Gertrude’s merry tea-party, the “ children,” for whom Mistress Medlicott had often asked, were all assembled beneath the Manor House roof once more.

A very much merrier party was assembled at the Priory. Walter had a fortnight’s holiday, and they had all come down on a visit to the Carringtons. An earnest letter from Rupert had been too strong for Walter to refuse, and the pleasure his mother and sister expressed at the idea of going altogether, decided him ; and nothing could exceed the attention and hospitality of the host and hostess, until Mrs. Ashleigh could not cease praising and admiring them ; and even Everard, who watched him so narrowly, could not detect the slightest trace of pain

or sadness in Walter's manner. All that showed (to one who knew his story) something of his feeling, was the intense love for the little Blanche, which she returned with all the passion of her nature. He was her "own, own beautiest Walter," and she rejected the smallest interference with him, and with the greatest assurance told the poor Doctor that "he was a very dood old man," but that Walter was her very own, "swfeetheart, what nobody was to have;" "boy baby was to tiss him, but nobody else." And with a strange smile that seemed born of tears Walter heard all this innocent love made to him, and would stoop down to the loving, earnest, uplifted face with the mother's radiant eyes, and kiss it tenderly.

Each day since they had heard the tidings from the Manor House, they had sent up to inquire how it fared with its

sweet Mistress ; and Everard had asked to be the messenger. Sometimes he saw the bright face that lived in his dreams blanched now by the great grief which hung over them all ; and then he would go back full of thought, and with a hope, that was almost a prayer, that he could comfort her and bring back the smiles to that joyous face. One morning he went up and was met at the door by Dr. Stillwell.

The good old man's face was stained with tears.

"Not over?" asked Everard, anxiously ; and "the child," as in his thoughts he called her, rushed to his mind.

"No ; but before nightfall, aye, at any moment," said the Doctor, and he turned away. He could not speak again. On earth to him would there ever be such a friend ? On her knees, before her crucifix in her own room, knelt Ma'mselle, tears streaming down

her face, not praying that the life should be prolonged, but that some day she might, through infinite mercy, meet her true, her best friend again, and be given new patience to bear her loss.

The girls were with her, two at each side of her ; and the Doctor who attended her, said by him that scene would never be forgotten. She seemed to be passing away watched visibly by angels, so beautiful they looked,—so quiet, so patiently, grandly bearing the sorrow ; following now the teaching of her to whom they were indebted for the example, as well as precept, of all that was excellent in woman.

“I will come again in the evening,” said Everard, softly ; and when the red sun sunk slowly down behind the western hills its rays fell on the calm, sweet, tranquil face and folded hands of her whose blameless life, whose patient trust and faithful love, had

gone to meet their reward. The girls felt no jealousy of Prescott though her last words had been to him, for as he stood beside her bed she had opened her eyes and said, very plainly:

“Ah! my Bertie, I told you I would come;” and then they closed, to open where “beyond these voices there is peace.”

In the evening Everard came again, and bore back to the Priory the heavy tidings. Heartfelt and sincere was the mourning throughout the village, and everyone who could by any possibility manage it attended Mistress Medlicott to her last resting-place. At the foot of the flat marble cross they placed, to mark the spot, was her name and age simply, and the words—“the path of the just is as a shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.”

CHAPTER XV.

THE Ashleighs have extended their visit another week. Not Walter—he said he must go back, to the great grief of little Blanche; but the ladies and Everard are to stay longer, the autumn weather was so beautiful; and whilst Rupert goes out with his gun, Everard stays to take care of the ladies—to drive them about, read to them, whilst they work, and, as he said smilingly, be their slave.

The Duke and Duchess, and Lady Edith and Mr. Prescott, had all left now; and Lilian and Gertrude and Ma'mselle were trying to bear the house, without the bright presence which had been so precious to:

them all. They had settled to go to the seaside in a few weeks, in hopes that the change would benefit them. They saw the Ashleighs often, and were glad to have Grace with them continually. They had asked her to spend the last day with them, before her return to London, and Everard was to fetch her home. The morning before he had received a letter from Walter, in answer to a very long one he had despatched to him ; and it was noticed by his mother and his friends that he was unusually absent and odd in his manner all day, and kept continually asking the time.

“Don’t be such an everlasting fidget,” said Rupert. “They don’t dine till seven at the Manor House, I know, and it’s no use your going till late. I want you to hear something very interesting to you ;” and he read from the paper a flourishing account of the clever invention of a Mr.

Greybrooke which had brought him into great notoriety, and would, no doubt, be the foundation of a great name. "We understand," read Rupert, "that this remarkable young man was only a farm-labourer in a small English village, and has by his own indefatigable exertions arrived at this celebrity."

"Greybrooke?" said Everard, in an inquiring voice.

"Why, man, the fellow you took such an interest in."

"Oh, yes! yes, of course. Poor fellow! I'm glad to hear he is doing well. I had a very cheering letter from him some time ago;" and then he relapsed into silence and looked out of window, and over and over again at his watch, till he at length found it really was time to start; and Rupert declared they were all very glad to get rid of him, and asked

Madeleine, when he was gone, what *was* the matter with him.

Madeleine smiled, and said perhaps they would find out some day.

The dinner over, the girls and Ma'mselle went to the small breakfast-room, where they preferred sitting now, in which was a cabinet piano, and shelves filled with pleasant books; and windows opening into a small garden filled with roses; and there, a little before ten, Everard was ushered in.

"Oh! you are early, Mr. Ashleigh," said Ma'mselle; "we cannot spare her yet. I am teaching her some new work."

"I am in no hurry," he said, and sat down beside Gertrude. No, he was in no hurry: he could have listened for ever to that voice, watched for ever the bright face.

At length she said, somehow feeling that his eyes were fixed on her face:

"You promised to give me a lesson on"

the stars, Mr. Ashleigh ; will you now ?—it's a beautiful night."

"Yes, willingly," he said.

"Come along, Lilian, you must learn too," she said, and she was out on the lawn before any of them.

How it was she never knew, but she was listening so earnestly to all he said, pointing upwards to those brilliant lights stud- ding the clear sky ; and the memory of her whose bright home was beyond those suddenly came to her, and with a little cry she buried her face in her hands and cried out : "Oh, Auntie ! my own dear Auntie ! come back to me !" and an arm stole round her, and a voice so gentle, so tender, said :

"You would not wish to take her from such happiness, I know."

"I am so lost without her," she said ; "I feel so alone."

And then the voice more gently, more tenderly, answered :

“ You need not feel so, if you would let someone care for you always.”

Gertrude looked round startled. They were alone—Lilian had gone in. She could see her sitting with Ma'mselle in the room through the open window.

“ Oh, Mr. Ashleigh, we must not stay here,” she said.

“ One moment,” he answered, taking her hand gently between his. “ I have no title to offer you, but wealth to keep you as the lady you are, and love, to deem nothing too great to do or dare for you. Will you let me love and cherish you until death us do part ?”

She looked up in his quiet face, with the sweet smile upon his lips she had always thought so sweet; and under the stars, whose wondrous history she had been trying

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to learn, they pledged their troth, "either to other," and Gertrude led a new brother up to Lilian for her sanction and her welcome, with her bright face glowing, and with the simple words :

"Lilian, he loves me ; he will take care of me."

She could have used no better words—he would "take care of her." As something too precious, too tender, that little wife was watched and tended ; and Lilian, in her quiet home, with her devoted, faithful "Ma'mselle" for her constant companion and Dr. Stillwell for counsellor and guide, was peacefully happy and content in the knowledge that those she best loved on earth were as happy as mortals could be. Pleasant visits to her married sisters cheered her in her duty, and her life of usefulness in the village—of gentle sympathy with those who suffered and joy with those who

rejoiced—won for her the love of all. She had opened the packet her aunt had left directed to her, soon after her death, and learnt the secret of the sweet, holy life she strove to imitate; and the highest reward she coveted she found she had now, when faithful Briggs, who still lived with her, told her that they said in the village she was a second Mistress Medlicott.

THE END.

